# In All That Vast Number

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# In All That Vast Number

by knotcricket

Summary

It's the zombie apocalypse and Hannibal Lecter is living his best life as the head of a polygamist cannibal sex cult.

#SoNotaLifeorRelationshipGuide

Just a note to clarify the tags - I went non-con to be on the safe side but I think in fairness it's probably closer to dub-con with situational elements that are non-con (e.g. slavery au and mating in heat). It's not forced sex between any of the principals or "on camera" with any of the background characters.
Likewise I went with "underage" but none of the characters are under 15/16 before they start having sex. Will is a kid in the beginning for plot reasons, not to sexualise him as a kid. There are sort of "first time"/"age difference"/"daddy kink"/"end of innocence" kinds of themes but it's not prepubescent underage if (god forbid) that's the only thing giving you pause at this stage.

# Selection

Hannibal Lecter was in no hurry to commit himself as he paced down the long corridor of the Baltimore State Omega Institute past row after row of fluorescent-lit shatterproof plastic cells. In truth all he could think about was shallowing his breathing to avoid the assault of cloying perfumes wafting towards him through the ventilation holes.

He was sure the trainers at the Institute had meant well – carefully bathing, primping and scenting each of their graduates before returning them to their cells and coaching them into a pose meant to catch the touring Alpha's eye. But the net effect was of an assembly line of gaudy mannequins - a veritable McDonalds of future consorts.

Dr. Chilton had started out giving elaborate resumes for each of the omegas - stopping at each cell to expound at length about this one's rare hair colour or that one's exceedingly graceful gait. Hannibal simply walked on trying to think of a pretext for covering his nose that would not be considered rude.

By the end of the third row, Dr. Chilton had lost heart and asked him directly what kind of omega he was looking for.

And how to answer that? Hannibal wasn't even entirely sure that he wanted an omega after all these years. It certainly had the potential to be very inconvenient given his lifestyle.

His Uncle Robertas had been happy to remain a bachelor until the day he died and yet it was in some ways the loss of that same uncle, his last remaining blood relative, that had started Hannibal casually scrolling through omega adoption sites and then touring neighbouring Institutes on his days off.

In short, he didn't know what he wanted but he was getting an increasingly clear picture of what he didn't want.

To duck the question, he pointed to a half-closed door at the end of the corridor and asked, "And what is through there?"

Dr. Chilton in frustration grabbed at the elbow of Hannibal's suit jacket and tried to turn him back the way they had come.

"That's nothing. Those are the cells for the omegas who are still in training," he explained. He followed the trajectory of the Alpha's eyes down and dropped his hand back to his side as if it had turned to lead.

"I'm sure we can find a finished one that will suit your needs."

"Can I see the ones that are still in training?" Hannibal asked without asking.

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible," Dr. Chilton sputtered as Hannibal slipped past him and into the next block of cells.

This corridor was much more dimly lit and crowded – the cells less than a third of the size of the ones in the show block. Most of them were empty and Dr. Chilton rushed to explain that that was because their residents were attending classes or meals or were in the exercise yard.

He tried again to stand in front of Hannibal and direct him back towards the finished omegas but the taller doctor simply sidestepped him and strolled down the corridor.

As he walked he registered that the scent of perfume in the other room had been replaced by the faint odour of blood and panic. This was more to his taste already.

The omegas in the training block wore fitted boxer-briefs and a padded leather vest with a handle on the back. The cells were completely bare and featureless except for a metal bedpan on a shelf at the back of each one.

As Hannibal walked past, several of the omegas moved forward and knelt near the gates of the cell presenting the backs of their necks to him. Unlike the omegas in the show block, many of these ones had thick welts and round bruises visible on their arms and thighs.

Hannibal stopped to examine one of them more closely and they were suddenly joined by a young guard who looked at Dr. Chilton desperately for direction.

“This is Dr. Lecter,” he explained. “He’s asked for a tour of the facilities. I was just explaining to him that these omegas are only partially trained and that the best-behaved ones will be off enjoying their privileges at this time of day. What’s left here are really the most unsuit…”

But Hannibal was moving on again to a cell at the very end of the row where all he could see were the soles of four bare feet pressed up against the plastic.

As he came closer he could see that there were two omegas in a cell barely larger than them clinging to each other so desperately it was hard to see where one of them started and the other one stopped.

“You have two here,” he observed blandly.

“Yes,” said the young guard whose nametag read Matthew Brown. “They are siblings who came in together.”

“Only a few days ago, wasn’t it?” Dr. Chilton jumped in. “They’ve had no training at all. They’re only just adjusting to the facility – normally they would be trained to at least present themselves…”

Dr. Chilton rapped on the plastic gate with his cane to get the omegas’ attention but instead of getting to their knees at the front they slid like a single creature to the back of the cell and tried to disappear into each other.

The movement was enough, however, to see that one of them was larger than the other – maybe fourteen or fifteen with short sandy hair. The smaller one was only nine or ten with a mop of black curls.

“I didn’t think you trained pre-teens,” Hannibal stated with a hint of distaste.

“We don’t,” Dr. Chilton jumped in hurriedly. “That is under normal circumstances. We take thirteen-year-old omegas when the parents don’t want to or are unable to train them themselves. As our clients come from a more… sophisticated… background - the omegas that train here have an opportunity to be introduced to a much better class of potential Alpha. We train them until they are eighteen and well-prepared to go to their forever homes. For example, the many accomplished and attractive omegas you saw in the other room…”

Dr. Chilton gestured back towards the door they had come through subtly insinuating himself between Hannibal and the cell with the two omegas in it.

But Hannibal would not be deterred now that his curiosity was piqued.

“So why are you training this omega? He can’t be thirteen.”

“No,” Matthew interjected as if startled back into the conversation. “He’s only nine.”

Hannibal waited several beats for him to elaborate before prompting him with, “So why are you training him?”

“They were recently orphaned. Their omega died giving birth to the younger one and their Alpha was killed in a car accident last week. Social services tried to separate them at the hospital but apparently that didn’t go well…” Matthew began to snigger in a manner that Hannibal found thoroughly repulsive.

“We’re not really planning to train him at the moment,” Dr Chilton clarified still desperate to salvage the situation. “We can train the older one and keep the younger with him as a companion until he is old enough to start.”

“Can I have a closer look?”

“As I said, they’re completely untrained. It’s probably best not to agitate them unless you’re intending to buy one of them.”

Hannibal considered the situation for a moment and then said, “Yes, I would like to see them.”

Dr Chilton stepped away from the door so quickly he nearly tripped over his own cane and motioned Matthew to open the gate.

Matthew unlocked the gate and stepped towards the two little omegas cowering in the corner. There was barely enough room for him to turn around with the three of them in the cell. He knelt down and tried to reach around to grab the handles at the backs of their vests to pull them apart.

The omegas snarled at him in unison and kicked uselessly at his shins which were covered in pads. The older one leant forward suddenly and tried to bite into his forearm getting nothing but a mouthful of shirt for his trouble.

Matthew dropped them both suddenly, whipped out the stun baton from his belt and shoved it into the arm of the older omega. The older omega flopped back like a fish and the younger one jumped away as far as he was able from the crackling sound of the baton.

Hannibal took the opportunity to grab the handle of the smaller one's vest and pull him out of the cell, holding him up to eye level like a kitten by the scruff of its neck. The little omega immediately curled into a ball and started distress whining.

Recovering quickly on hearing his brother's crying, the older omega tried to sneak out of the cell between Matthew's legs, but the guard managed to grab ahold of his handle and lift him up as well.

Both omegas were crying hysterically and trying to reach for each other but Hannibal and the guard held them apart.

"Let's go to the medical bay," Dr. Chilton suggested over the racket they were making. "There's more room and perhaps Dr. Bloom can give them a sedative."

# Examination

The omegas had not calmed down when they reached the medical bay and their caterwauling was loud enough that Dr. Bloom met them at the door with her arms crossed.

Hannibal and the guard carried the two omegas to an examination table where Dr Chilton tied restraints to their vests so that they could face each other on their hands and knees but could not move off the table and hurt themselves. The two omegas pressed their foreheads together and with the renewed contact their distress crying toned down to sporadic pathetic whimpering. Both omegas were shaking like leaves and had their eyes tightly closed.

“I just examined these omegas yesterday,” Dr Bloom told Dr Chilton coolly.

“Yes, well now Dr Lecter wants to have a look at them,” Dr Chilton replied glaring at her to be quiet.

“This is very disruptive to their schedules,” Dr Bloom informed them both. “Will in particular needs as much stability as possible right now.”

“Which one is Will?” Hannibal interrupted hoping to cut short the impending argument.

Dr Bloom pointed to the younger dark-haired omega and Hannibal moved over and began to examine him checking his teeth and spine, running his hands along his flanks and legs to feel the musculature and reaching for a stethoscope on the counter to listen to his heart. He shifted the omega’s vest just enough to slip his hand and the stethoscope under it and could see a dark linear bruise had formed across his chest and around his shoulder where the seat belt had restrained him.

The omega’s heart was thumping about like a ship’s rigging in a hurricane.

“It’s OK, Will,” Hannibal told him, pulling the stethoscope back and squeezing a bare foot with his other hand. “There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Apparently satisfied he moved on to the other omega who had started to pant from the stress and wobble at the elbows.

“What’s his name?” he asked Dr Chilton who consulted with his clipboard and then replied, “Randall”. Hannibal saw the older omega wince but he made no effort to offer a preferred alternative.

“There’s nothing to worry about Randall,” Hannibal murmured in his ear. “We’ll be done in a minute and nobody is going to hurt you.”

Hannibal stroked his hair gently to reassure him while avoiding a lump on one side of his forehead, likely from the accident as well. As he began the physical the omega was generally passive except when Hannibal tried to pry his eyes open to test his pupil response. The

omega rolled backwards and away tangling himself in his restraints and almost toppling off the table.

Matthew and Dr Chilton unwound him and pulled him back into position holding him there firmly while Hannibal continued with the examination.

When he had finished the external examination, he gently pulled down the older omega's shorts to just above his knees and, turning to Dr Bloom, asked for a pair of exam gloves.

"What kind of examination is this?" she demanded, the question tearing her attention away from her paperwork. Her narrowed eyes bore into Dr Chilton.

"It's a graduation exam," Dr Chilton explained while fishing a pair of nitrile gloves out of a drawer and handing them to Hannibal. "Dr Lecter is interested in purchasing these omegas."

"But they haven't had any training yet," she snapped. "And anyway you can't legally sell them until they're eighteen."

"Actually if they're orphans they can be sold at any time," Matthew offered helpfully. They turned to stare at him and he shrugged while explaining, "Law school. Night classes."

"He's right," Dr Chilton jumped in triumphantly. "They are legally wards of the Institute and can be sold before the age of eighteen because I can provide the guardian's signature."

"Fine but how can you sell them without any training?"

Hannibal cut in ahead of Dr Chilton's response "Actually, I have decided I would prefer to train them myself."

"Have you ever trained an omega before?" she demanded. "Do you have any idea how much work is involved? Especially for a pair of omegas that have experienced significant trauma?"

"No, I have not trained an omega before," Hannibal replied. "But I trust you and Dr Chilton will be able to assist me if I have any questions. I assume that ongoing consultation can be included in the purchase price."

"Yes of course," Dr Chilton said practically bouncing on his heels and waving his cane for emphasis.

"This is grossly unethical, even for you Frederic," Dr Bloom practically spat at him. "You may be their legal guardian and I may not be able to stop this but if either of you harm one hair on their heads I'll have you both up before the medical ethics board and that's just getting started…"

"Dr Bloom," Hannibal began in a tone not much different to the one he had used to reassure the omegas. "I have no intention of harming either of these omegas. I can assure you they will be as well cared for in my home as they would be here… if not better." He eyed the rapidly forming stun baton bruise on the older omega's arm significantly.

"I do hope that I will be able to call on you if I need any assistance, however."

Dr Bloom huffed at him and turned on her heels, storming into her private office which adjoined the medical bay. “Just leave me out of it,” she called back over her shoulder.

Hannibal turned back to the older omega who seemed torn between trying to shrink into the table and reminding the doctors that he was kneeling there with his ass in the cold air waiting for them to hurry up and finish.

He let out another soft whimper as Hannibal came over to stroke his hair again. An involuntary shiver ran down the omega’s spine and then he made a noise that was almost a moan as Hannibal ran a gloved hand through the downy hair at the base of his belly and over and around his little pink omega pseudocock.

It was heavy in his hand, despite the small size, and began to plump up as he ran the back of his hand under it to inspect the omega’s smooth hairless sack.

They were strange creatures, he mused, but attractive none-the-less. They had what looked like testes but produced no seed and a pseudocock which seemed entirely ornamental. He would need to refresh his studies on omega anatomy when he got them home… he meant if he decided to purchase them.

From memory, he didn’t think that omegas were supposed to grow so much hair on their lower bellies. That was more of a secondary sex characteristic of Alphas but perhaps it was simply a genetic quirk with this omega.

“Has he had a heat yet?” he asked, moving around to stand behind the omega and spread his pert cheeks as wide as he comfortably could.

“No,” Dr Chilton replied after consulting his notes again. “The hospital said there were traces of suppressants in his system but no sign that he had been in estrus. They surmised that his sire was giving them to him as a preventative. You can see he is unclaimed.”

Dr Chilton pointed to the omega’s pale pink hole, so tightly clenched Hannibal couldn’t help chuckling, patting the omega on the shoulder and telling him to relax again. He was indeed unclaimed. After the first time he was penetrated, the skin at the entrance to the hole would darken, letting everyone know that an Alpha was keeping him.

Hannibal dipped a gloved forefinger into a tub of Vaseline and rubbed it in gentle circles around the tight pucker. The omega let out a long cry that started off startled and indignant and ended up closer to a keen of pleasure. When Hannibal increased the pressure slightly, he thrust his hips forward, an involuntary response, and the folds of his ass closed around the tip of Hannibal’s finger.

Hannibal laughed again pulling his hand back. “You’re being a very good boy,” he told the omega. “Not much more to go.”

Dr Chilton handed him a speculum and Hannibal considered it carefully. “It would be a shame to stretch him out before he is claimed,” he said finally. “But perhaps another method will suffice… Do you have an ultrasound machine?”

Dr Chilton nodded and moved quickly to roll it over from the side of the room, turning on the monitor.

Meanwhile Matthew lifted Will off the table and brought him over to another corner to restrain him out of the way. Both omegas began to panic again at being separated. Hannibal knelt down to Will's level in the corner while Matthew and Dr Chilton flipped Randall over on the table and restrained him on his back.

He pushed the younger omega's curls back from his eyes, which remained squinched shut, and half-whispered "Everything will be fine, little omega. I just need to take a quick look at your brother and then we can all go home."

Turning he saw that Dr Chilton was unstrapping the vest over Randall's stomach while Matthew injected what he assumed was a sedative into one of his haunches. He thought to protest that he preferred not to drug the omega unless it was absolutely necessary but then he recognised the wisdom of keeping the pup as calm as possible when the restraint vest could not be fully engaged.

Hannibal warmed up the end of the ultrasound wand with his hands and then spread it with a tube of silicone gel that was kept heated by the machine. He set it gently into the crook of the omega's belly just over his hip and let it glide in slow circles from one end of his belly to the other.

With the vest pulled back he could see that the omega was slightly emaciated. Reaching for his chart from Dr Chilton he could see that the pup had been about twenty pounds underweight when he was admitted. There were no older records to explain if this was a recent development or if he was naturally a bit skinny.

It doesn't matter, Hannibal thought to himself. We'll have you back up to a good breeding weight soon.

"Do you have the rest of his medical history?" he asked Dr Chilton instead.

"No," he replied. "The hospital said their Alpha seemed to be transient – living out of the van they crashed in. And there were no records to trace where they came from except for Louisiana license plates. The van appeared to be stolen."

Looking down, Hannibal saw that Randall's eyes had opened and that he appeared to be trying to follow their conversation intently through the haze of his sedative. Hannibal noted in finer detail what a handsome pup he was - bright blue eyes, a button nose that was just a little too big for the rest of his face and a deep dimple in his right cheek.

Abruptly, Hannibal turned his attention back to the screen. His trained eye picked out the shapes of the omega's reproductive organs which were all fully mature and within acceptable parameters. His first heat was close Hannibal surmised from the gentle undulation along his tubes.

He pulled the wand back, wiping the gel off the end and removing his gloves. The omega seemed almost reluctant to see it go, but perhaps he was just missing the warmth.

Matthew moved to resecure the older omega's vest, lifting him off the table and depositing him in the corner next to his brother. The sedative was in full effect now and as he was set down Randall slid bonelessly against the wall until his head was in Will's lap. Will bent over to the side to rest his head on his brother's hip turning his face to the wall to block out the rest of the room.

Hannibal felt a strange sensation his chest – something like pride – which was an absurd thing to feel about two omegas he had never seen an hour before.

Dr Chilton cleared his throat and said "So…" expectantly.

"I am interested in buying both of them," Hannibal said, careful to keep his swelling eagerness and certainty out of his voice.

"That's excellent," Dr Chilton replied grinning from ear to ear at having off-loaded two omegas without incurring any boarding expenses. "I always say it's better if you plan to have two omegas to choose siblings. At least that way you know ahead of time if they get along."

"Perhaps we could discuss the terms in your office…"

"Of course, just this way Dr Lecter."

# Orientation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal killed the engine of his Bentley after pulling into his garage and rolled his eyes already beginning to regret his impulsive decision.

“That’s enough,” he told the two hooded omegas lying across the back seat. They had not stopped whimpering once on the entire forty-minute drive home and Hannibal felt the beginnings of a blinding headache starting to build behind his eyes. He knew he should have put them in the trunk but Dr Bloom insisted that that would distress them even further.

He waited until the garage door finished closing securely and then lifted them out of the car together, the smaller one sprawled on top of the larger one. They both quieted but tensed up in his arms.

He would have to have a little patience while they adjusted he told himself as he carried them upstairs to the guest bathroom. If he had planned things out a little better, he would have had some clothes, bedding and maybe some games ready for them but the truth was he had convinced himself all along that he was only window shopping. They would have to make do with what he kept for his usual guests until he could find time to go to the shops.

In the bathroom, he set the two omegas in a corner and began drawing them a warm bath. He made sure to lock the guest bedroom door leading into the bathroom and then closed the bathroom door as well to make it harder for them to bolt.

Once the tub was full enough, he turned the water off, pulled the heavy black hoods off their heads and began to unstrap the clear plastic muzzles that Dr Chilton had insisted he would need. The terrified and disoriented expressions on the omegas’ faces made the muzzles seem even more ridiculous than when they were first suggested but Dr Bloom had convinced him that for some omegas restraints could increase their sense of security.

He put the muzzles on the sink counter and set to work unstrapping them from their harness vests. Both omegas were silent now and stared directly at him with eyes as big as saucers and the rest of their faces red and flushed from the hoods. He couldn’t help smiling at them again and tousling Will’s hair.

With the vests off, they had only their boxer-briefs left. Hannibal decided to give them a little test and stepped back sitting on the lidded toilet but still facing them.

“Take your briefs off and get in the tub,” he told them aiming for a stern but non-threatening tone.

They hesitated for some time; the older one seemed to be trying to form an excuse in his head. Hannibal was about to intervene when Will slowly pulled himself up using the towel rack and then stood there shuffling his feet.

Hannibal decided to give them one more chance. “Take them off Will,” he repeated, coaching rather than demanding.

Will reached up to fiddle with the edge of a towel. Then he pulled it off the rack and handed it to Randall.

Just as Hannibal was about to lose his patience Randall held the towel up, Will pulled the briefs off behind it and then leaped into the tub. Hannibal grinned with satisfaction and then looked at the older omega expectantly.

Randall shuffled the briefs off while still sitting and then stumbled up to the edge of the tub. The sedative had not completely worn off yet and he was struggling to lift one leg over the edge of the tub while balancing on the other.

Hannibal lifted him up under the armpits dropping him down into the warm water where he immediately lolled his head against the side of the tub.

“Are you able to bathe yourselves?” he asked.

Will stared intently at Hannibal’s chin and then whispered “Yes” packing his tone with all the indignity of a child who was convinced he was being treated like a baby.

“Yes, Alpha,” Randall rasped looking down into the water and blinking rapidly.

“Good,” Hannibal said leaning down to pick up their briefs. “These need a wash and in the meantime I’m afraid I don’t have any clothes in your sizes. I’ll leave some of my clothes out on the bed for when you’ve finished. You can wear them for today.”

“Are you hungry?”

Randall gulped and shook his head no and Will followed his lead.

“Maybe a nap then when you’re done. I have a few errands to run and will be back in a few hours to make dinner. In the meantime, I expect you to wash yourselves including your hair, put the towels in the hamper when you’re done and then rest until I get back. Do you understand?”

The pups nodded cautiously.

“I need an answer pups.”

“Yes, Alpha” they whispered in unison.

“Good boys,” he told them and left them to it.

He brought the briefs into his own bathroom, considered throwing them in the hamper but dropped them in the trash basket instead, and then contemplated the long rows of bagged suits on hangers in his walk-in closet.

The older omega barely came up to the middle of Hannibal's chest and the smaller one was half again his brother's size. Not even Hannibal's boxer shorts were likely to fit them comfortably.

He settled on two of his older silk smoking jackets which would at least keep the omegas warm without tangling them up too much. He paired them with some thick wool socks. They would look ridiculous but it was only for a few hours until he could get them something more suitable.

He brought the clothes into the guest bedroom and laid them out neatly over the bedspread. He could hear some subdued splashing in the bathroom but resisted the temptation to check on the omegas.

Instead he tested the lock on the shutters over the window and then stepped back into the hall, locking the door to the guest bedroom. Dr Bloom had told him that the omegas would settle in best if he limited the amount of the house that they had to adjust to all at once and established a safe room for them to retreat to.

After further consideration he went to the kitchen, made up a bowl of fresh strawberries and cream with ladyfingers and a bowl of shelled pistachios and brought them up to set on their nightstand in case they got hungry later.

Satisfied that his omegas were secured for the immediate future, Hannibal sat down with the omega training guide that Dr Chilton had sold him and turned to the equipment list at the beginning of the first chapter.

It was somewhat daunting, so Hannibal decided to focus on the basics – clothes, a few things to entertain themselves with if Hannibal was called into work suddenly, the bare necessities if Randall went into heat.

He made a quick list on a piece of monogrammed stationary and grabbed his car keys. Before he left, he turned on his phone and checked the app connected to the cameras in every room of the house.

His omegas were still in the bath. Will was washing Randall's hair for him. He noticed that they both had an odd set to their jaws and turning up the sound he could hear them making a soft liquid trilling sound to each other. He had only ever read that omegas made that sound to settle their young cubs – not that they made it to each other or anyone else. He would have to check the manual for an explanation. He added it to his growing list of research questions.

In the meantime, however, he went to the shops. Fortunately, the copies of the medical records that came with their adoption papers included their measurements printed out in Dr Bloom's tidy hand. At the companion boutique to the one where Hannibal bought most of his suits, he picked out a few pairs of plain black fitted omega pants, some warm wool sweaters, cotton t-shirts, windbreakers, socks, underpants, house slippers and slip on shoes. He kept to neutral earth tones reasoning that when he had a clearer sense of the omegas' personalities he could dress them in something that expressed them better.

He went to the omega shop next and was again amazed at the entire universe of articles he had never imagined he might need. He settled on two handheld tablets that came pre-loaded with games advertised to improve his omegas' knowledge of world cuisine and ability to make dinner conversation.

There were a number of other games as well that made no pretense at educational value but were designed to keep omegas distracted for as long as possible. Hannibal hoped it wouldn't come to that – that he would have time to develop a suitable curriculum to keep his omegas stimulated – but he was never sure from week to week how much of his time would be needed consulting on cases for the FBI or meeting with patients so he decided that the games were a useful insurance policy for the time being.

For Randall, he picked out a cock-cage, a retaining plug, some lube and a jar of pre-natal vitamins just in case. It was almost unheard of for omegas to quicken after their first heat but Hannibal suspected that if any Alpha was potent enough to be in that 0.2% it would be him.

He had padded restraints at home already but was unsure about the size so he picked up a few extra pairs just in case. Some of his old pairs were a bit frayed – one half chewed through – and there was no harm in having more than he needed.

He'd already bought leashes and collars along with the training manual from the Omega Institute. He selected a few other omega training guides from the shop as well to make sure he was familiar with the gamut of techniques.

When he got home he brought the bags up to his closet except for the bag of omega clothes and their tablets which he dropped off outside their door for later. Pressing his ear to the wood he could hear nothing inside.

In his own bedroom, he opened up the surveillance app again to review their activities.

They had finished their bath and remembered to leave the towels in the hampers. Two points each in the reward column. They sniffed at the clothes Hannibal had put out but didn't try any of them on. Randall pulled the blanket around himself and curled up under the bed largely out of sight. Will nibbled on one of the ladyfingers cautiously while listening at the bedroom door for any noises in the hall.

When he had satisfied himself that Hannibal was really gone he went methodically around the room prying at the baseboards with his bare fingers, testing the locks on the shutters, their hinges, the give of the floorboards, digging into the empty cabinets under the bathroom sink and through all of the drawers and the medicine cabinet. Eventually he gave up trying to find a weapon or means of escape and crawled under the bed with his brother.

Hannibal fast forwarded through the final hour and a half where the two omegas remained hidden under the bed with no sound or movement.

"Well we certainly have our work cut out for us, don't we," he said to himself fishing one of the training manuals out of a bag next to his bed.

Chapter End Notes

How many smoking jackets does Hannibal have? I imagine at least five - for the different shapes of cigars...

# Dégustation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After an hour or so of skimming his omega training manuals particularly the chapters on settling new omegas and getting them through their first heat (just in case), Hannibal went down to the kitchen to make dinner.

He made a simple roast loin in Cumberland sauce for himself and shashlik for the omegas. He wanted to get them used to hand feeding but wasn't sure they would eat directly from his fingers on the first try.

When the food was done and the table was set he went back up to the guest bedroom, unlocked the door and went inside. The omegas were still huddled under the bed with only a tail of blanket sticking out from under it.

A very faint gasp of air as he walked towards the bed told him at least one of them was awake.

"Come out pups, it's time for dinner."

He waited a few moments to see if they would comply. When it was clear that they wouldn't, he yanked swiftly on the edge of the blanket and then grabbed the two ankles that this exposed.

Instead of pulling the rest of them out, however, he pinned their feet to the ground and said, "I expect to be obeyed, omegas. I will give you one more opportunity to be good boys and come out. If I have to drag you out, you will be punished."

He let go of their ankles and started to count down from five. Somewhere between two and one, the omegas emerged blinking and squinting from the light and with their hair sticking in all directions. Randall kept the blanket wrapped around both of them.

"Better," Hannibal told them. "Did you have a good rest?"

Randall glared at him resentfully, no doubt blaming him for the sedative but Will nodded and said "Yes, Alpha" very softly while staring at the ground.

Hannibal retrieved the bag he had left by the door. He pulled out a pair of omega pants in each of their sizes and a pair of house slippers for each of them setting everything on the bed.

Then he pulled out the two tablets to show to them. Randall looked interested immediately but Will kept looking at the floor.

"I want you to get dressed now," he told them. "And then we'll go down and have dinner. If you're well behaved, afterwards you can play games until bedtime. Do you understand?"

The omegas nodded... then remembered to say “Yes Alpha” when they saw he was about to correct them. Hannibal took it as a promising sign. At least they learned reasonably quickly and their personalities did not seem to be naturally oppositional.

Hannibal went into the bathroom to retrieve their vests and a hairbrush. When he came back, he saw they had both put on their pants and slippers. They were eyeing the door to the hall which he had left cracked open but snapped their attention back to Hannibal as soon as he came in.

“Good pups,” he told them as he strapped them into their vests and brushed their hair back into some semblance of order.

He led them into the bathroom and had them wash their hands with antibacterial soap. They had just taken a bath and Hannibal’s cleaning service kept the floors spotlessly clean at his insistence but it was the principle that mattered.

When they were done, he lifted each of them by the handles at the back of their vests and carried them out into the hall. He had considered testing their obedience again by ordering them to follow him but he suspected that the long walk downstairs and to the dining room past many of the other rooms of the house would be too distracting for them and there was always the risk of the food getting cold.

As he carried them, the pups craned around trying to peek into all the rooms they passed and even look up to see what was on the ceiling.

In the dining room, he set them on the floor on either side of his chair and then went to the wine cellar to retrieve a bottle of 1995 Médoc. When he returned, he saw that Will had crawled around to the other side so he was kneeling shoulder to shoulder with his brother.

He’d forgotten to specifically order them to stay put and he supposed it didn’t matter to him that much which side of the chair they sat on, but Hannibal felt a twinge of annoyance that the pup had decided for himself where to settle.

He sat down and began to caress Randall’s hair and the side of his face praising him for being a good boy and staying put. Will looked confused, then hurt, and finally slunk back to the other side of the chair looking at Hannibal’s other hand expectantly.

Hannibal found it charming to watch the omegas’ instinctual docility and eagerness to please asserting itself. He gave Will a fond pat on the head and then moved his hands back over the table to pour the sauce on the loin medallions.

He took a few bites, sipped his wine contentedly and then reached down to put a skewer of shashlik level with Randall’s mouth. The omega sniffed at it cautiously for a few moments and then snapped at one of the cubes of meat on the centre of the skewer nearly pulling the whole thing out of Hannibal’s grip.

“Slow down,” he told the omega with a measure of indulgence in his voice. “There’s no rush.”

He set Randall's skewer back on the plate while he was chewing on the first cube and then lowered the second skewer for Will.

After a moment, Will reached up to try to pull the first cube off the end of the skewer.

"No hands," Hannibal told him sternly and the omega's arms dropped immediately.

After a moment, he sniffed at the cube again and then pulled at one corner of it with his teeth. It slid off on the third try and Will tipped the rest of it into his mouth by angling his head back.

Looking over he could see Randall watching them intently, his eyes following the skewer longingly as Hannibal placed it back on the table.

Hannibal took a few more bites of his own meal to test their patience and then lowered the skewer for Randall again. He went on alternating between feeding them and himself noting with some amusement that Randall attacked only the cubes of meat, seemingly in random order, while Will dutifully took whatever item was next off the end.

When Randall finished all the meat, he seemed to have lost interest.

"You need to eat the vegetables too, Randall," Hannibal told him. "I will not tolerate waste or picky eaters."

He could swear he saw the omega roll his eyes at him as he nibbled off a slice of roasted onion and sat chewing it openmouthed like it was ashes. Hannibal thought about correcting him but then decided it was a lesson for another day. The purpose of today's exercise was just to begin instilling positive associations with hand feeding.

Eventually the omegas finished everything on the skewers, Will somewhat faster than his brother. Hannibal ordered them to stay and then went back to their room to retrieve the strawberries and cream which he had left out earlier and they had not touched.

He put the cream away for another use since it had been sitting out for too long, and quickly melted some white chocolate to drizzle over the strawberries.

When they were done, he brought a plate back to the table and was pleased to see that the omegas had not moved, although they had shifted positions so they were lying down on either side of the chair instead of kneeling. They both pulled themselves back up onto their knees when they saw him.

He sat down and offered a strawberry to Will first. After a little hesitation and placing his teeth as far away from Hannibal's fingers as he could without letting the food drop, Will accepted.

Randall was less fastidious again and took the food right away even letting the edge of his lips touch one of Hannibal's fingers.

After feeding another strawberry to Will, he took a bite out of half of one of them himself and offered the other half to Randall.

He watched as desire for the fruit overcoming the fact that it was half-eaten played out across the omega's face. He ate the strawberry eventually but with obviously less enthusiasm than the first one.

Hannibal smiled and decided that would be enough for the first night. He pushed the chair back and picked them up again to bring them upstairs.

Randall moaned from the pressure of the vest on his full belly and twisted back and forth trying to get Hannibal to put him down again.

"If I put you down will you be a good pup and follow me?"

Randall nodded.

Hannibal put them both back on their feet and started for the stairs checking back every few minutes that they were still padding along obediently behind him.

Will took little stagger steps as they passed some rooms with his head swivelling around to try to see what was in them but every time Hannibal was about to take his arm or pick him up again he would hurry to catch up to them.

Back in the guest bedroom, Hannibal took their vests off, had them wash their hands again and brush their teeth and then gave them the tablet games to keep them occupied. He double checked that they had enough toilet paper and that the bowl of pistachios was still there in case they got hungry again during the night. That reminded him to go back downstairs to get them two shatterproof mugs that they could drink from if they got thirsty.

Satisfied that they had everything they needed to settle in, he gave them each a pat on the head (both were too absorbed in their games almost to notice) and told them good night, locking the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Google is responsible for the wine pairings so blame them if they're OOC for Hannibal. I'm afraid I'm just a smut peddler, not a sommelier.

# Initiation

Hannibal woke suddenly to the unexpected sound of water running through pipes in the wall behind his bed. He turned the light on his nightstand to its dimmest setting and checked the watch sitting next to it. It was just past three in the morning.

It took him a few foggy moments to remember that he had actually brought two omegas home the previous day and that they were currently supposed to be sleeping in his guest bedroom.

He reached for his phone, turning on the surveillance app with one hand while he rubbed the last of the sleep out of his eyes with the other.

The first screen showed him the guest bathroom where the bigger omega – Randall was his name – was sitting in the tub, folded bonelessly against one side, running water through the detachable showerhead over himself.

On the second screen, in the bedroom, the little omega was anxiously pacing around the door to the hallway, testing the handle and working up the courage to bang on it.

Hannibal's heart lunged for a moment. The training manual had explained that pheromones in the saliva of an Alpha could trigger a heat reaction in unclaimed omegas but he hadn't seriously thought the amount he'd left on the strawberry would be enough to be effective.

Forcing himself not to rush, he stood up and made the bed pulling the long bolster off the ottoman and placing it at an angle that would facilitate mounting. He set the supplies he had bought out on the nightstand and, when he was satisfied with the arrangements, walked down the hall.

When he opened the door to the guest bedroom, Will all but tackled his front leg, frantic to lead him into the bathroom. He could hear a low and continuous moaning sound coming through the open door.

Burying his grin, lest Will take it the wrong way, he allowed the little omega to guide him to the edge of the tub.

The water coming from the showerhead was ice cold and made white circles on Randall's flesh wherever it was directed but otherwise his skin was cherry red. Hannibal turned the water off and then reached over to test the omega's forehead. He could feel the heat radiating off his skin from several inches away.

The pup's eyes were unfocused and listless and beads of sweat broke out across his face now that the water was no longer washing it away.

Will gave a little distress cry and actually made eye contact with Hannibal, his expression pleading with him to do whatever it took to fix his brother.

“He will be alright, Will,” Hannibal told him lifting him to go back to the other room. Surprisingly, the omega allowed it without protest. “I know how to make him better. But he’s going to have to come with me for a little while.”

“How long?” Will asked gulping.

“Just for a few hours and then you can come and see that he is fine.”

Will looked sceptical but allowed himself to be placed back in the guest bed and the blanket pulled over him. Hannibal noticed that Randall had soaked through the sheets and the blanket on his side and considered changing the bed to make Will more comfortable but decided it was more important to tend to the older omega for the moment.

“You’re a doctor,” Will said more to himself than to Hannibal.

“That’s right,” Hannibal told him. “This is completely normal. He just needs to spend a little time with an Alpha and then he’ll be the same as always. You be a good pup and go back to sleep and I’ll bet by the time you wake up, your brother will be ready for a visit.”

“OK,” Will whispered dropping his eyes but not completely closing them.

Hannibal went back to the bathroom where Randall had slid to the bottom of the tub chasing the last of the cool water with the side of his face.

“Do you want some help Randall?”

The pup nodded miserably and said “Yes, Alpha.”

Hannibal grabbed his largest towel and gathered the omega up in it, lifting him out of the tub and setting him on the toilet seat. He rubbed as much water out of the omega’s hair as he could and then swabbed off the rest of him. Hannibal noticed that the omega was making gentle circles with his hips while he sat trying to capture more of the friction of the rough towel against the entrance to his hole.

“Just be patient,” Hannibal told him. “I have something for you that will be much more effective.”

When the omega was dry enough, Hannibal wrapped him in a fresh towel and lifted him up under one arm. Randall brought an arm up to hold on to Hannibal’s neck and dropped his head into the crook of the Alpha’s shoulder. He could see the pup’s nostrils working, chasing after his scent and could feel the slightest bit of tension go out of the omega’s frame.

Hannibal realised for an absurd moment that he would be completely happy to stand there all night breathing in the sparkling scent of the omega’s hair – something like orange blossoms or jasmine - and feeling the pup’s chest rising and falling in rhythm with his own.

Renewed frustrated moaning from the omega jogged him out of his reverie.

He carried the omega into his bedroom and set him on the ottoman while he locked Will’s door and closed his own. When he got back he saw that Randall had dropped his back onto

the cushion and spread his legs with his knees in the air. His hand was starting to knead at his little pseudocock with increasing urgency.

“No pup,” Hannibal told him with measured sternness. Randall didn’t seem to hear him or didn’t understand so Hannibal pulled the offending hand away and then pushed it under the omega’s curving back.

“You don’t touch yourself there without my permission. Do you understand?”

Randall gave a long groan in reply and then tried to roll over onto his knees. Hannibal released him and let him turn while he went to the nightstand to get the cock cage and lube.

When he got back to the ottoman, the omega was presenting for him, a fresh trickle of slick starting to slide down the inside of his thigh.

“We’ll get to that in a moment,” Hannibal told him pulling him around so that he was on his back again.

Hannibal lubed up the cock ring and slid it easily around his pup’s organs. The contact made the omega a little too excited to put the rest of the cage on easily so he gently twisted his balls until his pseudocock went down enough for the cage to slip on.

“How does that feel?” Hannibal asked testing the give to make sure the fit was right.

Randall chewed at his lower lip and frowned as he twisted his hips to try out the weight and level of restriction.

“You need to learn not to come until my knot is inside you,” Hannibal explained patiently. “When you have a little more experience, I can try mounting you without it.”

He leaned forward between the omega’s legs until the pup was trapped beneath him and then he seized his lips in a deep hungry kiss. Randall arched under the Alpha as if something was being drawn out of him.

He seemed unsure what to do at first but after a few moments followed Hannibal’s lead making soft nibbling motions at the Alpha’s lips. Hannibal deepened the kiss several times to insure a good transfer of mating hormones.

Suddenly Randall’s eyes flew open as he realised his fever was breaking a little. Hannibal smiled at him and ran a hand through the sweaty spikes of his hair - which wasn’t quite long enough to get a good grip on.

“We’ll grow your hair a bit longer,” Hannibal told him as Randall leaned up greedily seeking more contact.

Hannibal let the omega take a few more little kisses and sniffs around his neck before pulling back to stand upright again.

“Turn over on your hands and knees,” he told the omega and Randall almost rolled off the side of the ottoman in his eagerness to comply.

Hannibal slid out of his pyjama top and bottoms and folded them neatly on a chair forcing himself to slow down and let the anticipation circulate through his system. He had only had one omega before and never an unclaimed one or one in heat. He knew that both of them would likely remember this for the rest of their lives and he wanted to savour every second.

He walked back to the ottoman and stood behind the omega spreading his cheeks to inspect his hole. The bud of it twitched under Hannibal's thumb as he tested how much slide the omega's slick gave him.

The manual advised him to take the omega roughly the first few times to help establish and reinforce their respective functions. Hannibal wanted to make sure the pup had enough slick to take him hard and fast and for a good length of time without needing to stop and add more lube.

There was enough to let Hannibal slide a finger in to the first knuckle but then another wave of heat made the omega clench so hard around him Hannibal almost saw stars.

Pulling his finger back when the omega relaxed again, Hannibal used the little bit of slick that trailed after it to help stroke his long, thick cock up to the peak of its engorgement.

He scooped up some of the precum that was seeping from his tip and began to rub it in placid circles just inside the omega's hole where it would stimulate his glands to increase slick production.

After a very short time, he was rewarded with a gush of slick that almost coated the back of his hand. He used it to finish readying his cock and then leaned forward to place a row of bruising kisses between the omega's shoulder blades.

Stepping back to look at Randall again, Hannibal almost laughed to see how far gone he was already. The omega's eyes were rolled back and he was rubbing his cheek against the velvet of the ottoman cushion while twisting his rump around to entice the Alpha.

Hannibal grabbed him firmly under the arms and dragged him across the bedspread, which rode up a little under his knees, until he was draped over the bolster.

He tested the omega's hole again and found that two fingers slipped in easily and a third with a little coaxing.

He climbed onto the bed and over the omega, caging him with his arms and indulging himself with another deep sniff behind the omega's ears.

He used his knees to push the omega's thighs a little further apart. Randall made a rumbling noise that was almost like a growl as Hannibal lined the end of his cock up and started to slide it in.

He had meant to take the omega with one hard thrust but as soon as he breached the ring of his omega's hole he was flooded with a sense of bliss so overwhelming it stopped him cold for a moment.

When he came back to himself he realised the omega was breathing in deep long huffs and with each exhale was sliding himself a little bit further and further back onto his cock.

“That’s a good boy,” he told him patting the outside of his hip and then gave another strong push which only gained him another half inch or so into Randall’s tight furrow.

It took another few minutes until Hannibal had buried himself completely in the flushed and panting omega. He felt like he had run up a mountain already and they were barely getting started.

He pulled back out until only his head was captured and then tried a firm slide all the way in. Randall let out a little wail of pleasure under him and started trying to turn to kiss him but Hannibal held his hands down to the bed nibbling at one of the pup’s earlobes instead. He was rewarded with a deep shiver that set off a pulsing in his cock.

Hunting the sensation, Hannibal began to thrust - stiff deliberate jabs giving way to increasingly frenzied, driving and demanding rutting.

The wet clapping sound of his heavy clenching scrotum against the inside of the omega’s thighs chased every other thought out of Hannibal’s mind and he could feel his knot beginning to swell – much more quickly than he could ever remember it expanding before.

The omega felt it too and started to panic at the stretch. He wiggled a little as if trying to crawl out from under the Alpha and Hannibal’s instincts overwhelmed him. He thrust his knot in until it locked and then bit down on the omega’s shoulder to pin him in place.

A few short, restricted thrusts later and he was coming – rush after thick rush of hot claim deposited deep in his new mate.

When he was done he rested for a brief moment with his forehead between Randall’s sweaty shoulder blades. He struggled to reorder his thoughts which seemed to be flying like electricity around his extremities. He worried for a few seconds that he would not be able to capture them again and felt a flash of resentment – as if the omega had manipulated him into giving up something precious. The feeling was overwhelmed a second later, however, by the delightful dragging sensation on his cock as the little slave struggled to catch his breath.

When his movements steadied, Hannibal rolled them both over onto their sides his knot still buried firmly inside his omega.

Randall looked a little wild-eyed but not distressed by the experience. Hannibal gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and told him what a good pup he had been while he worked the cock cage and ring off with one hand.

The omega came as soon as the ring was removed giving a sudden yelp of surprise as his passage started clamping down hard around the unyielding length of Hannibal’s cock. The exquisite pressure on his knot brought Hannibal to a second, even longer, but less productive climax. If he didn’t pace himself the little pup was going to drain him dry.

Randall hummed contentedly and rubbed his forehead along the muscles of Hannibal's arm. Hannibal licked at the little beads of blood on the omega's shoulder where his teeth had just broken the skin.

"Now you know who you belong to," Hannibal told him.

# Exploration

The buzzing, vibrating dance of his phone on the nightstand brought Hannibal reluctantly back to consciousness. The omega was still curled up in bed with him, but his cock had slipped out to rest in the gap between his thighs.

As he rolled over to answer the phone, Randall started to stir as well. Hannibal brought an arm up to partially enclose the omega's head, stroked his hair and said, "Shhh, go back to sleep."

"Dr. Lecter," a deep baritone voice barked as soon as he accepted the call. "I need you."

"It's five thirty in the morning, Jack," Hannibal replied.

"If the lunatics don't sleep in, neither do you. Meet me at the Highway 40 entrance to the Patapsco Valley State Park in forty minutes and bring rubber boots."

"I'm afraid I'm not available at the moment. I have some urgent family business to attend to for the next few days.'

"Nonsense, Dr. Lecter. I have four dead betas and an intelligent psychopath running around getting a taste for it now. What can you possibly think is more important than catching the son of bitch?"

"My agreement to consult for the FBI is on a contractual basis and subject to my availability with respect to my other commitments," Dr. Lecter explained. "And I won't be spoken to like one of the betas in your unit that you seem to enjoy making jump. As I said, I have a pressing family matter to attend to. If Dr. Heimlich is not available, I might be able to come in on Wednesday or Thursday to assist you."

The line went silent as Jack hung up on him.

Before his annoyance at the other Alpha's rudeness could build a full head of steam, Hannibal felt his omega stretching out and rolling around to face him.

"Good morning Randall. Are you feeling better now?"

The pup gave off a long mmmmhhhmming noise, his eyes still closed as he draped himself across the Alpha's chest.

"Are you hungry? Do you want me to make you something to eat?"

Randall shook his head no and then suddenly looked up and around.

"Where's Will?"

"He's fine," Hannibal reassured him. "He sleeping in the other room. Do you want to go and visit with him for a little while until your heat crests again?"

Randall looked a little confused but then nodded his head yes.

“OK. Come with me for a minute and then we’ll go and see Will.”

Hannibal led the omega into his en suite and rolled the dimmer lights on to full. Randall stopped and winced at how much brighter it was than in the bedroom.

Hannibal sat on the edge of the bathtub where he had good access to the sink and the drawers under it. He motioned for the pup to come and stand beside him.

“Lie down over my legs,” Hannibal instructed him taking one of the omega’s hands and starting to guide him into position.

Randall hesitated and then offered an uncertain protest. “I didn’t do anything bad.”

“It’s not a spanking,” Hannibal reassured him. “Although it will be in a minute if you keep misbehaving. I just want to check that everything is still OK. If you’re a good boy for me, you can go and spend the rest of the morning with your brother.”

Randall reluctantly lowered himself over the Alpha’s legs shifting a little to find the most comfortable position.

Hannibal took some anti-bacterial cream from the drawer and spread it generously around the bite mark on his new mate’s shoulder. Then he raised one of his legs slightly to tilt the omega’s rump up into better light.

Randall tensed and gave little protesting squawks as Hannibal spread his cheeks and examined with considerable satisfaction the deep purple colour that the pucker of his little omega’s hole had shifted to. It would settle back to a permanent crimson red once his heat was over but in the meantime Hannibal could enjoy the evidence of a job well done.

There were no signs of blood or tearing. Hannibal gave a few gentle wipes with a damp washcloth to make sure there was no residue around the hole that would cause chafing later.

He used a combination of lube and more antibacterial cream to coat the retaining plug and then gently pressed it against the omega’s entrance rubbing his lower back with his other hand to help reassure the pup.

Randall tried to turn around to see what was happening and as he shifted his weight, Hannibal slid the plug all the way in. It was much smaller than his cock but large enough that it would stay in on its own without a deliberate effort to remove it.

Randall gave a yelp of surprise and twisted back and forth helplessly trying to get back to his feet. Hannibal curled over to hold down his thighs and upper back until the omega gave up.

“It pinches… oww, it really hurts” Randall sulked when he realised his struggling wasn’t getting him anywhere. Hannibal could tell from his tone that the pup was uncomfortable and embarrassed but not in any actual pain.

“Only because you keep shifting around,” Hannibal told him bluntly. “In an hour or so you won’t even feel it.”

“An hour? How long do I have to wear it for?”

“Until I decide to take it out,” Hannibal informed him.

With that, he took another wash cloth and finished wiping the last of the dried slick and come from the inside and back of the omega’s thighs. When he was satisfied that the pup was as clean as he was going to get without a full bath, Hannibal moved to stand and let the omega roll back onto his feet.

Randall shifted back and forth a little, his face scrunched into a frown and he reached back to feel for the end of the plug.

Hannibal knelt down again to his eye level and said evenly “If you take that plug out Randall, I will whip you so hard you won’t sit down for three weeks.”

He watched the omega struggle to process what he had said and then drop his hand back to his side.

“Good boy,” he told him petting his hair and kissing his forehead. “Let’s go see your brother now.”

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Will never made it back to sleep after the Alpha came to take his brother away. As the morning light started to seep in through the slats of the shutters he sat in the corner nearest to the door staring at it bleary eyed and willing it to open.

It was too terrible to even think that he could lose both his father and his brother, the only family he had in the world, within the space of a few weeks. And then what? Spend the rest of his life as a living dress-up doll for some brutish knot-for-brain? No thank you.

He’d been sitting there for so long, he almost didn’t believe it when the door did open and the Alpha came in with his brother limping beside him.

He didn’t notice the limping at first, however, because of the flood of relief that overwhelmed him.

Randall looked grumpy but conscious and himself again. His skin wasn’t maroon anymore and as Will threw his arms around his neck to hug him he noticed that the fever had completely broken.

Unable to contain himself, he gave the Alpha a look of perfect gratitude before closing his eyes to focus on the hug.

Randall made a little “oofing” sound to signal that his patience with the hugging was done. Will let go of his neck and walked with him over to the bed where they lay down together on top of the blanket.

Randall grabbed the tablet from the nightstand and pretended to be immersed in it until the Alpha left them alone without saying anything for once.

Will crawled up between his brothers arms so that they could watch the same screen together. He made a little warbling sound to let his brother know again how glad he was that he wasn't sick anymore. Randall gave him a little acknowledging trill back and then focused on joining up the dots in his game. Every since Will had been a cub, he and his brother had shared their own little language with each other that not even their father understood. The young omega didn't even want to imagine what it would be like to have no one else to speak it to.

After a few moments Will asked him, "What happened?" He could feel such an overwhelming tangle of contradictory emotions from his brother he didn't even know where to start.

"Nothing, I'm fine," Randall told him and Will knew him well enough to be sure that was the most he was going to get.

The Alpha came back in about twenty minutes later with two round glass bowls filled with what looked like fancy scrambled eggs.

He set the bowls and two spoons on the nightstand and sat down on the bed next to them. When he took the tablet out of Randall's hand the older omega rolled over onto his other side facing away from them.

"His heat is going to return a few times over the next day or so," the Alpha explained to Will as if they had been best friends forever and the subject of their conversation was not lying right next to them listening to everything.

The Alpha showed Will how to find the menu on the tablet and send a text message. The only contact showed a picture of the Alpha over the word "Master".

Will wanted to make a fake gagging gesture but since Randall was facing the wrong direction to appreciate it, he restrained himself.

"When he starts to seem confused again, I want you to send me a message and I will come and take care of him. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alpha" he whispered hating that there was something in the Alpha's voice that always made him feel three years old again.

"Good pup," the Alpha said tousling Will's hair while he stood up again.

"Eat your protein scrambles before they get cold," he told them from the door. "You too, Randall. Your heat will be less unpleasant if you stay hydrated and keep your energy up."

When the door was closed, Will crawled around into Randall's arms again handing him back the tablet.

"Eat your protein scramble, Randall," Will told his brother seriously with a thick European accent.

Randall let out a snorting involuntary giggle and gave him the first genuine smile Will had seen since the accident… since well before the accident really.

They started to play one of the games together – a spectacularly stupid and insulting programme that involved matching pictures of food with large greyed out shapes in a refrigerator. When they dragged the right food over the grey shape, the game would make a bright chiming noise and then a mix of the Alpha's voice and an overly excited computer voice would say "Well done, Randall. Those are 'grapes'!" or "Good boy, Randall. You put the 'chicken' on the right shelf!" no matter which one of them was playing it.

After a few rounds, they were laughing uncontrollably at the ridiculous supportive feedback the game was giving them ("That's OK, Randall, you tried your best!"). A few rounds after that their belly laughing had turned into real hunger.

They flipped over and devoured the protein scrambles. Will thought it was probably the best thing he had ever eaten in his life. With their father they had lived entirely on Froot Loops, diner food and takeout pizza. He was absolutely going to run away the first chance he got but when he did he suspected the one thing he was going to miss was having his own personal chef.

When they were done with breakfast, they tried a few other games but there was nothing on either of the tablets that wouldn't have bored a dim five-year-old. While Randall started to snooze, Will tried to figure out some way to access the Internet. He could get into the settings, and he could see that networks were disabled but he needed a password to change the settings.

He tried to guess the Alpha's password using the limited amount of information he knew about him. "Knot-head" didn't work and neither did "bossy pants", "fancy man", "psycho" or "protein scramble".

Getting frustrated and bored, he leaned back on the bed and then noticed a slight heat was starting to radiate from Randall's skin and that he was beginning to look flushed again.

He wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want the Alpha to take Randall away again but he didn't know how to make him better himself.

When Randall started to moan and it was obvious he was deteriorating fast, Will picked up the tablet and texted "Please help" to "Master".

The door opened what felt like seconds later and the Alpha crossed over to the bed to feel Randall's forehead.

"Good job Will," the Alpha told him. Will choked back a hysterical laugh - he sounded so much like he did in the tablet game.

"I need to take care of your brother for a while now," the Alpha explained giving him an inscrutable look while lifting Randall up. "Be a good boy and play your game."

He carried the older omega out of the room leaving the door wide open.

Will's heart leapt but then he remembered last time the Alpha had come back moments later to lock it.

He waited patiently on the bed facing the door with his "aren't I a well-behaved boy" expression plastered on his face for when the Alpha came back.

After a few minutes, he walked over to the doorway and peeked out into the hallway. There was no sign of the Alpha anywhere. Leaning out at the waist without daring to put his feet over the threshold he could see further down the hall but still no sign.

A few minutes later he worked up the courage to step out into the hallway. The Alpha hadn't specifically ordered him to stay in the room – just to play the game. He kept the tablet clenched in one hand as his alibi in case the Alpha confronted him.

It was a long hallway with a number of doors on either side. Will remembered a story that Randall had told him once about a maze and a man with a cow head and that the way not to get lost was always to make right turns.

He put his right forefinger against the wainscoting and set off trailing the knuckle along the wall behind him.

The first few rooms were also guest bedrooms, not very different to the one he and Randall were in. All of them had locked shutters as well. Peering through the slats he saw that they looked down into the neighbours' side garden, not out into the street.

There was a billiards room and an art studio and a baby plant nursery. Expensive looking paintings hung on every wall, even in the guest bathrooms and each room or suite was carefully colour-coordinated and themed. All the windows were locked or secured.

At the end of the hall was the only door that was closed. Pressing his ear to it, Will could hear the Alpha grunting from the effort to treat his brother's fever. He could hear Randall groaning as well but at least it sounded like he was getting better too.

Will tested the door handle gently, found that it was locked and then moved back down the hallway and towards the stairs.

There was an entire room filled with musical instruments he had never heard of before – kinds of xylophones and stringed instruments like pianos without keys and what looked like a rotisserie with hundreds of glass disks spitted on it.

Will picked up a felt mallet and tapped it on his hand several times before accidentally dropping it on the floor. He froze, ready to dash back for the bedroom if the Alpha came in but after a few minutes he realised nothing was going to happen, He put the mallet back carefully and then went back into the hallway and down the stairs.

He saw the dining room where they had been last night and the biggest kitchen he had ever seen. They both had floor to ceiling windows looking out into a huge garden with a tall brick wall all around it, it's own fountain and a shed at the end. He tried to see if any of the

neighbouring houses had windows looking down that he could be seen from if he tried to create a signal but he couldn't find any.

The pantry and wine cellar were each larger than some of the motel rooms that Will had lived in with his father and brother.

There was a formal sitting room, a downstairs lounge and a guest bathroom but it was obvious that the heart of the house was the Alpha's study – two storeys with an honest-to-God sliding ladder, floor-to-ceiling books on almost every wall and half a dozen cosy looking chairs to curl up and read them in.

Will forgot immediately that the purpose of the exercise was to find a way out of the house. He ran his fingers along the soft leather bindings of the books squinting to see the titles, many of which were in fading gold script and in Gothic lettering.

Many of them weren't in English - a lot of French and Italian – some in Russian script. There were shelves and shelves of books on psychology, anatomy, art history, philosophy...

At the centre of the library, the Alpha's desk stood like a pediment and throne.

On the floor next to the desk was a hemp shopping bag filled with even more books the Alpha hadn't had time to shelve yet.

Will picked one off the top and saw it was an omega training manual. Those were always kept in the grown-up section of all the libraries or bookstores he had ever visited. Overwhelmed with curiosity, Will took the book over to one of a pair of leather armchairs near the desk and started to read it.

The first section he turned to was about how to keep omegas entertained. The author explained that some omegas could be inquisitive little things, not intelligent exactly, but with an instinctual need for regular social contact and mental stimulation. Will rolled his eyes.

The book recommended that games and toys programmed to give regular positive reinforcement in their master's voice was one way to keep omegas from getting into trouble when their Alpha was busy attending to other things.

Will sighed and flipped to a different section of the book. This one dealt with positive and negative reinforcement.

He was just getting into the second paragraph when he heard a rustling and creaking sound, looked up and saw the Alpha settling into the leather armchair across from him.

He froze, absolutely petrified, unable to form a single thought.

The Alpha was completely casual, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for them to be sitting down together for an after-dinner chat. He adjusted the bottom of his smoking jacket, brushed some imaginary lint off of it and said, "What are you reading Will?"

He sat patiently waiting for a response while Will struggled to remember how words worked.

“B-b- a book,” he stuttered.

“That sounds interesting,” the Alpha replied and resentment at his bemused and condescending tone helped Will recover himself.

“What is it about?”

“Omegas,” Will told him figuring it was pointless to lie when the Alpha could see the spine and cover for himself.

“What about them?”

“H-how to train them.”

“And what are you learning?”

Will glanced down at the open page desperately and grabbed at the first word he easily recognised.

“Treats,” he exclaimed triumphantly. “You have to give them. For, um, positive reinforcement.”

“Oh yes? What kind of treats?”

Will looked down at the page again and read directly this time, “You should keep a well-stocked supply of small finger foods that the omegas particularly like to reward positive behaviour.”

“And what do you and Randall particularly like?” He couldn’t tell if the Alpha was making fun of him, was baiting him into a punishment or was genuinely interested. Usually he could read peoples’ emotions like a book but something about the Alpha always seemed to be remote and closed off to him.

Will took a long moment to consider and then said, “I like tater tots and he likes chicken nuggets.”

He saw the knuckles of the Alpha’s hands go white for just a second clutching the arms of the chair before he relaxed and changed his grimace back into an indulgent smile.

“I think that’s enough reading for today,” the Alpha said. He stood up, took the book, put it back in the bag with the others and then put the bag on one of the highest shelves on the ground floor.

“Can I finish reading it?” Will asked, his eyes following the bag longingly.

“Maybe another time…” the Alpha said but it was obvious this meant no.

“When?” Will pressed him anyway.

“When you’re all grown up and have omegas you need to train.”

# Edification

Randall's heat finished the next day after a few more intense cycles, which Hannibal understood was not unusual for a first time. His next heat, which was due in three or four months, would last a few days longer and he would be much more likely to be fertile during it.

Hannibal made a note to buy some birth control pills for Randall before then. While the purpose of getting an omega was ultimately to have cubs he was in no rush, preferring to take some time to train his pups properly and get them up to peak health and fitness first before they were distracted by new responsibilities.

While the older omega rested between sessions, Hannibal worried about what to do with the pair of them when he needed to return to his work.

He was already having trouble keeping Will engaged in constructive activities when he needed to look after Randall. He shuddered to think what the pup would get into if he was left in the house alone for five or six hours at a stretch.

Reviewing the surveillance videos, he could see that both pups had been very interested and entertained by the tablet games the first hour or two but had then, for some reason, lost their enthusiasm for them.

He kept the door to the guest bedroom open all the time now so the omegas had the run of the house hoping that this would give them more exercise and stimulation. But every time his back was turned, Will was testing the locks on the doors and windows or stealing kitchen knives and hiding them away in various other rooms or sticking his nose into books that were too mature for him or trying to get onto the internet using rude passwords.

In desperation, he let the omegas watch television but even that didn't seem to occupy them for very long. When he went to check on them they were kneeling backwards on the settee and looking out the window yearningly - watching the sparrows flick between some hazelnut trees in the garden.

Finally, he called Dr Bloom to ask for her advice swallowing his annoyance at the smug tone of the beta's voice.

"Omegas are extremely social creatures," Dr Bloom informed him as if this was not the first piece of advice in each of the fifteen omega training manuals he had already consulted. "If they're misbehaving it's probably because they're bored - cooped up with only the three of you in the house."

"I understand that," Hannibal replied. "I'm just not sure what to do about it."

"Why don't you bring them to the Institute for some classes?" She suggested and it made such obvious sense Hannibal immediately felt foolish for not thinking of it himself.

“They don’t need to be boarded to attend class. It will give them something to do and an opportunity to interact with other omegas.”

“Do you think Dr Chilton will agree to it?”

“If you pay him enough, he’ll agree to anything.”

Hannibal was torn. He really preferred to train the omegas completely himself and enjoyed it when he had the time for it. Perhaps he could find some elective classes for them that would keep them occupied at least some of the time but would not pre-empt or interfere with any of the training he had planned.

He called Dr Chilton next and arranged for a time to bring the omegas in for some placement testing. The director was reluctant to take Will at first, but Hannibal convinced him that the omega was bright enough to keep up at least in the non-academic subjects and eventually the sum of money that he offered overcame Dr Chilton’s reservations.

The next morning, Hannibal’s Bentley pulled once again into the visitor parking at the Baltimore State Omega Institute. The pups started whimpering nervously in the back seat as soon as they recognised the building but Hannibal reassured them that they were only there to take a few tests. He had no intention of returning them.

He unhooked their leashes from the catches over the door and led them in to the front office.

Dr Chilton met them as soon as they arrived with the same sleazy, ingratiating grin he had had on his face the last time Hannibal saw him.

He led them all into the small library, which was virtually empty, and then put the omegas in separate reading cells where the librarian could supervise them through the glass windows that formed the front wall of each cell.

The omegas didn’t want to be separated but Dr Chilton insisted that they had to be “for the integrity of the testing process” and they obeyed when Hannibal made it clear to them that there was no alternative. Dr Chilton locked the doors to each of the rooms and assured Hannibal that they would be quite safe while they completed their placement tests and he was given a tour of the rest of the facility.

Looking back as they left the library Hannibal saw that Will was happily ticking away at his answer sheet while Randall was slumped over the desk staring at the tip of his pencil.

They visited the arts wing first. Hannibal watched with great interest as they passed a series of bright and cheerfully decorated classrooms where large flocks of omegas were being taught to paint, sketch, write poetry, sing, dance, play music and even put on little plays. Although the class sizes were somewhat larger than Hannibal considered ideal, it looked like the omegas were happy, orderly and engaged with their lessons.

The next wing was for physical activity. The omegas could take supervised classes that would encourage them to run, swim, do yoga and play badminton. There was also a large grassed

exercise yard with a circuit of activities and the opportunity for the omegas to get a little sun and fresh air in a safe, enclosed environment.

After crossing the yard they came to a wing for more advanced students. Dr Chilton explained that the purpose was to improve the ability of omegas to carry on an intelligent conversation because, as Dr Chilton expanded in a mystified tone, some Alphas seemed to like that kind of thing. “A lid for every pot,” he said with a snigger. Hannibal moved on to peer into one of the classrooms without responding.

There were much smaller classes here – only four or five students in some of them – and the omegas were learning about literature, history, politics, philosophy, psychology and even foreign languages.

The last two wings were for classes on beauty and comportment; and sexual performance. Hannibal told Dr Chilton he didn’t need to see either of those wings as he would be doing that training himself. Dr Chilton seemed vaguely disappointed not to have an excuse to visit but led Hannibal to the staff break room instead to get some coffee while they waited for the omegas to finish their placement tests.

When they opened the door, Hannibal was surprised to see one of the teachers beating a student with a thick wooden paddle. The unfortunate omega was splayed over a low table with his briefs around his knees and his backside bright red from the apex of his buttocks to halfway down his thighs. There were even little flecks of blood where the paddle had broken the skin.

The teacher let the student up from the table as soon as he saw Dr Chilton. The omega scrambled to pull his briefs back up and his face turned redder than his haunches when he noticed there was an Alpha looking at him as well.

Once he was able to walk again, the teacher pushed him towards the door by the back of the neck saying, “That’s enough for today, Nathaniel. Go practice your arpeggios.”

The omega shuffled past them red-eyed and sniffling and Dr Chilton moved to introduce Hannibal to the instructor who set the paddle on the table so that he could shake Hannibal’s hand.

“Dr. Lecter, this is Mr. Budge. Mr. Budge, Dr. Lecter. Tobias is one of our most talented instructors. In addition to teaching music, he also understudies cello for the Baltimore Symphony and composes original works.”

“Ah, that’s very interesting,” Hannibal said sizing up the handsome but somewhat serious instructor. “I have season tickets to the symphony. I’m surprised we haven’t met before, as small as the arts community is in Baltimore.”

“Well I’m sure we’ll run in to each other in the future,” Tobias replied. “I moved here relatively recently and am always looking to widen the circle of my acquaintance.”

“Tobias throws the most astonishing dinner parties,” Dr Chilton told Hannibal. “If I close my eyes I can still smell his Pork Roulade with Smoked Foraged Mushrooms. The composition

was exquisite."

"That sounds wonderful," Hannibal responded but was relieved from the requirement for further comment when a short phrase of harp music came over the intercom system signalling a new class period.

"Do excuse me," Tobias told them, leaning forward to shake Hannibal's hand again. "And I hope we will have an opportunity to finish this conversation another time."

"Of course, Mr Budge" Hannibal said nodding.

When the door closed behind Tobias, he turned to Dr Chilton and paused for a moment as if puzzled and choosing his words carefully.

"I am surprised you allow Alphas to teach here," he said finally. "Doesn't that create problems with so many unclaimed omegas running around everywhere?"

"Oh, I know what you're thinking, but Tobias is actually a beta. He's comes across a little… assertive… I know. We actually asked him to submit a DNA test before he could start instructing here. I reviewed the results myself and they prove he's not an Alpha. We would never allow that to happen – it would be unworkable, as you say. And he really is an excellent instructor. His pushes his students hard but at his last teaching position four of them went on to medal in national competitions."

Hannibal paused for another long moment, then picked up the paddle on the table, turning it over and over in his hand, while Dr Chilton cleared his throat nervously.

Finally, Hannibal broke the silence. "It is unacceptable to me that anyone else discipline one of my omegas. If I enrol them here, then I expect that to be communicated to any instructor who might come into contact with them."

"That could be tricky," Dr Chilton said. "It makes it very difficult for the teachers to maintain order in the class if they are allowed to punish some students and not others…"

"My omegas will not misbehave and if they do, you have my permission to call me at any time to resolve the situation. I can assure you there will not be a need to do so more than once."

"Well, I assume they'll wear collars while they're here," Dr Chilton suggested, thinking aloud. Hannibal nodded in response. "I'll just let all the staff know that they're not allowed to punish omegas in collars and need to bring them to the office instead. I imagine if we ever enrol any other claimed omegas, their Alpha will feel the same way"

Hannibal nodded again. "That would be fine."

Dr Chilton's phone buzzed at his side and he started slightly before checking it.

"Your omegas are done with their placement tests and Mrs Coleman has finished grading them. Shall we go see the results and pick out some classes for them?"

The omegas were sitting side by side on the bench in the front office and Hannibal could see at once that something was wrong with them. Randall wouldn't look up from the floor and Will was looking around nervously and chewing his lip. He assumed they were anxious about their results.

At Hannibal's direction, the omegas stood up and followed him into Dr Chilton's office sitting on either side of him in the chairs facing the director's desk.

"This is really quite astonishing," Dr Chilton was saying as he read the first page of the results. "I have never seen scores so high for an omega Will's age."

Hannibal smiled broadly giving the younger omega a gentle shake by the back of his neck.

"I want him to take French. Both of them actually. And music appreciation. Swimming. And Will can take a few of the conversation classes."

"Are you sure? All of the other students will be 16 or 17 at least."

"Yes, the whole point is to challenge him. If he can't keep up after a few classes, we can find some other ones that are better suited for him."

Hannibal looked down and saw the younger omega was beaming but trying hard not to show it.

"That fine then," Dr Chilton said, entering notes in his computer. "What hours do you want to bring them?"

Hannibal brought out his diary and read out the times he had scheduled for his regular patients.

"OK, I will try my best to find classes with suitable topics that fit around those times."

"I am also on call to do consulting for the FBI. If I need to do some work for them on short notice, would it be possible to bring the omegas in for a few hours and let them take yoga or swimming classes or some other classes that they could easily drop in on."

"That should be possible. Many of our staff members are always looking to make some extra money and might be able to watch them on short notice during their break periods as well. That would cost a bit extra of course."

"Of course."

"Now, Randall…" Dr Chilton said flipping to the next page. From the corner of his eye, Hannibal could see the omega had his knees pulled up and was shrinking into his chair.

"Randall's answer sheet was completely blank," Dr Chilton told them holding it up for Hannibal's inspection. "And he spent the hour drawing zoo animals on his test booklet. That makes it very difficult to choose appropriate classes for him."

Hannibal turned to stare down the omega who had an expression like he hoped the earth would open up and swallow him at any second.

“Why didn’t you complete the test as you were asked to, Randall?”

Randall paused for so long Hannibal was about to reask the question with more emphasis when the omega started muttering into his knees, “Why do I need to take a test just to go to stupid music appreciation classes? I don’t even want to come here. Why can’t I just stay at home and Will can do whatever he wants?”

The look Hannibal gave the defiant omega when he peeked up to see his Alpha’s reaction stopped Randall dead in his tracks. He suddenly shrank into himself even more turning red to the tips of his ears.

“He can’t read it,” Will blurted out before Hannibal could act on his unspoken threat.

His brother growled “Shut up” at him and moved to run out of the room but Hannibal caught him around the waist and pulled him into his lap. The omega went slack almost immediately, completely mortified and hanging his head.

“It doesn’t really matter,” Dr Chilton said, eager to defuse the situation. “We can probably design a full schedule for him where he doesn’t need to read anything and find some alternative testing and grading system. It’s not like we’re preparing him for a career in a STEM industry, are we?”

“No,” Hannibal decided. “I want him to be able to read. Don’t you have any classes for that?”

“It’s not really what we do here. All of our students learned in primary school…” Randall gave a little groan and Hannibal shook the hand holding his stomach slightly, warning him to keep quiet.

“But as I said, we sometimes have staff members who want to make some extra money and they might be able to tutor him during their breaks.”

“Yes, that’s fine. I’m happy to pay extra.”

“OK, so all I need to do is finalise a schedule for each of them and they should be able to start tomorrow at… 9:30 as long as we receive the deposit we discussed before the banks close tonight.”

Hannibal stood to shake the director’s hand again as Randall slid back onto his feet.

“Thank you very much Dr Chilton and we look forward to seeing you again tomorrow, don’t we pups?”

“Yes, Alpha” they said in unison, Will genuine and eager and Randall looking like he would rather be boiled, stuffed and mounted.

# Collision

Chapter Notes

* About 70% of this chapter is explicit non-consensual humiliation, bondage and belt spanking without safewords or adequate aftercare. If that's not your thing and you want to take a pass, I've bullet pointed the relevant plot developments** in the end notes. Alternately, just read through to the Quantico stuff and then check out when Hannibal gets a phone call.

** Yes! There actually is a plot (or at least there's meant to be). Sorry it's taking so long to get to it. Thought it might be nice to get to know some folks, establish some characters/relationships and get some stuff out of our systems before the shit hits the fan. If you're mostly here for the zombie action and have run out of patience with angst, navel gazing and smut, maybe check back in in seven or eight more chapters and definitely skip chapter 9 (sorry!). There's a sixty or seventy chapter arc planned and there's still a couple more key players I was hoping we could meet before it all kicks off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Randall was seething before they even made it to the first class. He had been seething ever since the doctor strapped a collar around his neck and told him he was going to the Institute whether he liked it or not. Until that moment he had held on to a vague, improbable hope that the previous day had just been a bad dream and he wasn't going to be forced to take stupid omega classes.

Their sire always said school was a waste of time – that all a real man needed to know was how to fix engines, fish, drive a car and handle his liquor. Unfortunately, it turned out he'd only been halfway decent at two of them.

Everything Will and Randall knew was from being dropped off at public libraries while their sire had a job on or just wanted them out of his hair. Will would bury his nose in a book somewhere and Randall would find a nice bored librarian to give him snacks or an art class or storey-time to sit in on.

Their first class at the Omega Institute seemed to confirm their sire's opinion of education generally. They were told to paint pictures of puppies based on photos of puppies. If you already have the photo, why do you need the picture, Randall thought as he added a bear hovering over his puppy menacingly.

But at least Will was in the class with him - and a lot of other omegas that gave them friendly smiles and offered to share colours with their new classmates. And the teacher gave them lots of encouraging pats on the head no matter how hopeless and untalented they were. She even gave them mugs of cocoa at the end while she went around putting gold stars in the corner of

everyone's work. She hesitated for a few moments before putting one on Randall's but then went ahead and did it anyway.

The second class was where it all went to hell. Will had to go off to another part of the building to take classes for the smart omegas and Randall was stuck in a room by himself with a private tutor who was supposed to be helping him catch up to the dumbest omegas in the rest of the school including the ones two years younger than him.

The tutor just confused him by trying to compare the sounds from letters to musical notes, which Randall also didn't know anything about. Finally the tutor got frustrated, wrote a row of letters on the top of a sheet of paper and told Randall to copy each of them fifty times while he read his newspaper.

The only good thing about the task was that Randall could finally hear himself think again. He felt like everything since the accident had gone by in a haze. He'd knocked his head really hard on the side of the van before he even knew what was happening and blacked out for most of it. They'd been sedated at the hospital, then again for their intake medical at the Institute, then again when the doctor came to buy them.

And then Randall had been sick for days. But he didn't want to think about that. He just needed to copy the letter "b" another 35 times and then get through the rest of this stupid, miserable day.

At some point he was going to have to tell everyone that he wasn't actually an omega. He'd tried to do it at the hospital but the doctor just told him they had some test that said he was an omega and that he was confused because of his concussion. And when he tried to tell the guard at the Institute he just got hit with the electric shock stick. And then he'd been worried if he did convince someone they would split him up from Will - so they had agreed not to say anything. But how long was he supposed to keep the act up?

His sire had constantly been telling him to "Alpha up" whenever he started crying about something. And if he wasn't an Alpha, how could his sire possibly not have known about it? His dynamic was on his birth certificate and every other piece of paperwork relating to him.

The blood started to creep up the back of his neck and around his ears when he thought about what his sire would say if he knew what he'd done with the Alpha doctor.

He hadn't really had a choice, he could see himself trying to explain, but the truth was there were parts he had liked a lot and even encouraged. The plugs were awful – thank God he didn't have to wear them anymore. But he really loved feeling the Alpha's heaviness all over and around and then inside him, holding him in place, how cool his skin felt in the beginning before it started to warm up, the way he took charge of what happened and when and how fast and hard…

Randall suddenly realised that his thing was sticking up, completely obvious in his school briefs, and there was even a wet patch starting to form in his seat.

He panicked completely. The tutor was still buried in his newspaper and didn't seem to notice but the class period could end at any time and then he'd have to walk down the crowded halls

with everyone staring at him.

“Um, I have to go to the bathroom,” he said as he rushed past the tutor towards the door. The tutor lowered one corner of the paper without really looking over it and shouted “Two minutes” after him.

Randall raced as fast as he could given his predicament, stumbling down the hall from the classroom door to the nearest student bathrooms and diving into a stall.

He didn’t know how to make it go down. He could maybe try drying the briefs under the hand drier but it wouldn’t make a difference if he couldn’t make his stupid thing stop standing up.

He tried to push it down but the contact only made things worse. He tried force of will, pulling the seat of his briefs back to restrict it more, pinching himself. Everything made it worse.

Finally he thought if he just rubbed it very fast maybe it would get tired. He didn’t get very far into trying though before he felt the tutor’s heavy hand on his shoulder.

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Hannibal breathed a sigh of relief as he drove away from dropping his omegas off at the Institute. He enjoyed them even more than he had been expecting to, even when they were a little naughty or rambunctious. But he wasn’t used to being responsible around the clock for other living beings. He realised he hadn’t had a moment to himself in almost four days. That was quite an adjustment from living alone for decades, coming and going as he pleased.

His pups were someone else’s problem for a few hours in any case. Now he could focus on his work. It was almost an hour’s drive to Quantico in terrible traffic but Hannibal listened to a CD of the Goldberg Variations of Aria da Capo and the trip went quickly.

He was hoping to pick up the crime scene photos discreetly from Dr Katz and then study them for a few hours where he could have some quiet and privacy but as soon as he walked in the door she all but shouted “Good morning Dr Lecter” and that brought Agent Crawford bounding out of his office.

Hannibal gave Dr Katz a withering look in response to her smirk and then turned to the burly Alpha bearing down on him.

“Doctor Lecter,” he bellowed. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

At his tone, Dr Katz and her two assistants pretended to have work in the other lab and scurried off.

“Good morning, Jack” Hannibal replied. “It is always a pleasure to be here.”

“What ‘family business’ could you possibly have that was so important you were happy to let my crime scene go stone cold before waltzing in here three days later at 10:30 in the morning…”

“My business is my own, Jack. I am not obligated to share it, even with you. However, if you would like my assistance with the profile, I am here now.”

“Dr Katz,” Jack shouted at the top of his lungs without breaking eye contact. Hannibal refused to cover his ears, squint or otherwise react to the other Alpha’s conspicuous dominance display.

The beta doctor stopped pretending she wasn’t listening at the door and came in.

“Please read Dr Lecter in on the Duelling Banjos Case. He’s decided he would like to remain employed here.” With that Agent Crawford stormed back into his office and slammed the door.

Dr Katz came over to his side quickly, leaned in and in an unwelcome parody of intimate friendship said, “What, were you helping a saucy little omega through her heat?... Oh my God you were! Look at your face!”

“Let’s just discuss the case,” was all Hannibal would reply. “Before we give Agent Crawford another reason to lose his composure.”

He walked over to look at a series of photos spread out on an examination table.

“Why are you calling it the Duelling Banjos case?”

“That’s just one of Zeller’s stupid in-jokes. We keep finding betas in remote parts of national parks with no clothes and the first three fingers on their right hands cut off.”

Hannibal surveyed the crime scene photos dispassionately.

“What do you know about the victims?”

“They all work at the same laboratory.”

“Do you think someone is trying to gain access? To make use of their identities?”

“Maybe, but why would they? It’s a nutritional science lab. The first victim was researching how to improve the taste of shelf stable tartar sauce. The second one breeds bumblebees. The last two victims were receptionists. Jack thinks that maybe a jealous co-worker at the lab…”

Hannibal’s phone cut her off - the ringtone he had programmed for the Institute.

“I do apologise, Dr Katz. Please excuse me. If you email the case file to me, I can review it this evening.”

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Hannibal pulled into the visitor parking of the Omega Institute for the second time that day determined to keep his temper no matter what. His omega had not managed two hours…

Dr Chilton would not tell him over the phone what had happened – only that it involved Randall, that it could not wait until the end of the day pick-up and that it was serious enough that they needed to discuss it in person.

That left a lot of fuel for speculation on Hannibal's long drive back. In addition to making him look like an incompetent handler in front of Dr Chilton and Dr Bloom, the omega's misbehaviour would also give Jack Crawford another excuse to harangue him for not taking his consulting work seriously enough.

Hannibal took a deep breath as he stepped out of car. All of the omega manuals agreed that it was crucial to be firm but not to express anger or resentment when disciplining them. Knowing that they had displeased their Alphas but could earn forgiveness sent omegas into a positive feedback loop of shame and behaviour modification. But thinking that their Alphas were very angry with or even hated them would cause omegas to drop.

Hannibal had been carefully curating his emotional responses and expressions since he was a young child, but he could barely remember a time, certainly not for decades, when he was as angry and frustrated as he was now.

When he entered Dr Chilton's office he was surprised to see that Tobias Budge was waiting there as well. They both stood up to shake hands and greet him.

"Well," Hannibal prompted brisky without sitting down.

"I'm so sorry, Dr Lecter," the music teacher began. "This is quite awkward."

"Whatever you have to tell me, I am ready to listen."

Tobias shifted uncomfortably again and said, "I was tutoring Randall and he was doing quite well… but then he asked to go to the bathroom. I didn't think anything of it, but when he didn't return for several minutes I went to find him and he was…"

"Yes," Hannibal supplied feeling a dropping sensation in his gut.

"Well, he was touching himself inappropriately."

"I know he's just at the beginning of his training," Dr Chilton jumped in. "But this kind of behaviour we have to take very seriously."

Hannibal realised he was grinding his teeth so hard his jaw was starting to cramp.

"Yes, of course Dr Chilton. He certainly knows better."

"I think perhaps it's too early to label him a deviant," Dr Chilton continued. "But if he was still in the Institute's care, this is the kind of thing that we would make a significant intervention to correct."

"No, that's quite right," Hannibal responded icily. "Where is he now?"

“He’s in the medical bay,” Tobias provided, rising to show Hannibal the way. “He became quite distressed when we informed him that you were coming and Dr Bloom felt it would be best for him to wait somewhere more private.”

Hannibal marched ahead of him, remembering perfectly well for himself how to get there.

When he walked into the medical bay he could see that the lights had been dimmed. Randall was lying with his nose a corner and his lead tied to a hook in the wall above him. Dr Bloom was kneeling over him and rubbing circles on his back.

“Good morning Dr Bloom,” he said brusquely, crossing over to them. “Thank you for your assistance but I can handle the situation from here.”

His pup gave a little whimper on hearing his voice and then scrambled to his feet with his head hung down.

Hannibal unlatched the lead from the hook, shortened the length in his fist and started back for the car at a quick pace, the omega stumbling to keep up with him. Dr Bloom seemed to be about to say something but Dr Chilton signalled her to stay out of it.

At the car, Hannibal latched the omega up to the hook over the passenger door. The pup crumpled immediately across the back seat covering his head with his arms and trying to bury his face in the crease between the seat and back rest.

Sitting in the driver’s seat, Hannibal took several deep breaths before turning on the engine. The peaceful harpsichord music immediately began to irritate him and he switched it off as quickly as he could.

As he drove, he struggled again to moderate his racing thoughts with a cooler-headed assessment of the situation. It was clear that his omegas had no respect for him. Or at least that he had been far too indulgent with their almost constant prodding at his authority.

It was no longer charming or able to be excused by their inexperience. They needed to understand, for their own safety as much as anything else, that obedience was not optional.

At the house, as Hannibal pulled his omega out of the car, the pup started crying and trying to make eye contact with him. Steeled in his resolve now, Hannibal led him swiftly into the study, bent him over the desk and told him to stay put.

The Alpha went upstairs to his walk-in wardrobe and made himself take another four or five deeps breaths to ensure that he was completely in control of himself.

He walked up to the belt rack and spent some time considering his options. The width needed to be sufficient to make a real impression. He was unsure if patterns or weaves in the leather would be more or less effective but decided that they would be more difficult to properly clean if he had to and ruled them out. He wasn’t planning to use the buckle end but wanted to make sure it wouldn’t scratch or pinch his hand. He also didn’t want to use one of the belts he wore frequently. It would be dedicated to this purpose from now on and he didn’t want his pups to have any other associations with it.

He made his selection, picked up the arm restraints from the nightstand and brought them back down to the study thinking carefully about what he wanted to say.

His pup was still splayed over the desk crying in deep racking sobs when he came in. When Hannibal moved to take off his vest, tie his arms up with the restraints to a hook under the desk and pull his briefs down to his knees, Randall complied passively however his Alpha moved him but kept his eyes squeezed shut.

Hannibal pulled his chair around to the side of the desk where he would be in the omega's eyeline and sat in it. He leaned forward to cup a hand behind one of the omega's ears and ran his thumb tenderly through the wet trails on Randall's cheek. Then he told him to open his eyes.

The pup obeyed at once, the sheen of tears lending an almost startling brilliance to their usual blue colour.

"I want you to listen to me very carefully Randall. Can you do that?"

The pup nodded immediately and with enthusiasm but it wasn't good enough.

"I need an answer please."

"Yes, Alpha," the pup responded almost before the statement was out. His voice was hoarse from his earlier sobbing but he was trying his best.

"Nobody, under any circumstances, ever touches you there except for me. Especially not you. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Alpha," the pup said closing his eyes and nodding.

"Open your eyes," Hannibal told him firmly and the omega pulled them open again with a gulp.

"When I tell you to do something, you obey me."

"Y-yes, Alpha," the pup shot in, unsure if he was being prompted.

"We had this conversation the first night you came here. I am extremely disappointed to be having it again."

The omega gave a big hiccupping sob but then opened his eyes again just before Hannibal was going to remind him.

"I'm sorry," he started to offer but the look in Hannibal's eyes cut him short.

"You're going to be punished now to make sure we don't need to have it a third time."

Hannibal stood up and picked up the belt. When the pup saw it, he gave another loud whimper and squinched his eyes closed turning his head to rest on his other arm. This time Hannibal allowed it.

Hannibal spread his left hand gently but securely across the small of the omega's back to hold him in position. He curled the belt in his dominant hand, brought the arm back about halfway and landed the first few smacks square in the middle of the omega's backside. He felt Randall tense after each stroke but his crying seemed to have gotten a little quieter as he accepted his fate.

When the skin began to flush, Hannibal started putting his whole arm into it spreading the strokes across the lower parts of his cheeks and into his sit spots. Now Randall was tensing ahead of the blows, uncertain about when they would fall. He started to give little cries in rhythm with the heavy thwacks of the belt instead of the continual snivelling he had been doing earlier.

The strokes began to fall more regularly, faster and harder now. Hannibal felt his hair fall across his forehead and took his hand off the omega's back to wipe the sweat off his brow. He stood back a little and then with his whole strength brought the belt down on the back of the omega's thighs.

Randall started clenching and struggling after each blow, trying to twist and curl himself up despite the arm restraints and desk being in the way. This slowed down the pace considerably as Hannibal waited for the omega to settle himself after each stroke before delivering the next one.

Finally, the pup seemed to have run out of energy and went quiet. Hannibal put his hand back in position to steady him and delivered the final few hard, slow smacks for emphasis.

He put the belt down, took a second to catch his breath, and started to rub Randall's shoulders with one hand while he undid the wrist restraints with the other. The pup's face was buried in his upper arms.

"Do you have anything you want to say to me?"

"Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry…" the omega chanted, too embarrassed to look up.

Hannibal ran his hand through the omega's hair and told him what a good boy he had been and that he was forgiven now. He checked the marks on the omega's backside – only a few small cuts but the beginnings of what would be some significant bruising. He rubbed a little anti-bacterial cream into the cuts, shushing the omega when he hissed at the contact. Then he lifted his pup to carry him upstairs.

Randall folded slack into his arms. Hannibal was worried for a second that the pup had passed out but then he shifted to position his nose under the Alpha's neck and was taking deep, eager breaths of his master's scent.

"Good pup," Hannibal told him again as he carried him into his bedroom. "That's my good boy."

The Alpha set him gently on the bed and then pulled the duvet over and around him, letting the omega rest his head on Hannibal's thigh as he stroked his hair gently.

The pup was worn out, quiet and still. When Hannibal's phone started ringing, however, he started letting off soft whimpers again.

It was Dr Chilton on the other end wanting to know when he was planning to pick up Will who had finished his classes for the day but had no one to collect him.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Hannibal told the director, cursing himself for getting distracted and forgetting the pick-up time. It would be another forty minutes before he got there and Will would likely be acting out in response to feeling abandoned. The last thing he wanted to do was spend the rest of the evening bringing Will into line too.

He set a pillow under Randall's head, gave him a quick kiss on the forehead trying to ignore the pleading look in his pup's eyes, and left swiftly to take care of his other omega.

Chapter End Notes

If you've skipped this chapter because of the trigger warnings, all you need to know is:

1. Randall thinks he's an Alpha
2. Dr Katz is a shit stirrer (not sure that's a *development* though)
3. Hannibal and Dr Katz are working on a case involving lab workers who keep turning up dead in national parks with missing fingers.
4. Randall gets punished. Hannibal gets interrupted from bringing him down from it because he has to pick up Will.

Abandoned tags: Dr. Chilton does not help

# Impression

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I apologise again," Hannibal told the director as they walked down the corridor of the arts wing, the faint sounds of Chopin's Polonaise in A Major greeting them from one of the classrooms. "It's unforgivably rude of me to lose track of time like this. I can assure you it will not happen again."

"That's perfectly understandable," Dr Chilton replied. "New schedules always take some getting used to and, as we discussed, we are generally able to accommodate your omegas outside of the usual hours for an additional fee. Unfortunately, on this occasion and on such short notice the only class we could find for Will to drop in on was Freeform Movement to Music…"

Entering the studio where the music was coming from, Hannibal could see a large, gangly flock of omegas in colourful tutus spiralling and stomping around in random directions with their arms extended.

Through the flurry of motion, Hannibal finally spotted his little omega standing in the corner, arms folded over his vest, tutu kicked away from his feet and steam practically coming out of his ears.

Hannibal crossed the studio and then knelt down to eye level for his omega.

"I'm very sorry, Will," he said trying to tilt the omega's chin up to make eye contact with him. Will twisted his face away to avoid it and then stared daggers into the ground again.

Hannibal wanted to continue his explanation and apology but the music and the fluttering of the other omegas was too distracting. He clipped his lead into Will's collar and brought him out to the car instead.

The pup climbed angrily into the centre of the back seat and then sat with his arms crossed, not saying anything.

Hannibal shut the door behind him, sat in the driver's seat and watched his fuming omega through the rear-view mirror.

"I'm afraid I had some very urgent business to take care of today. In the future, something like this should only happen very rarely and I promise I will do everything in my power to ensure you are collected on time."

They sat in silence for a few seconds and then Hannibal decided that he had had enough.

"Will," he said deliberately. "What do you say when someone apologises to you?"

Will just shrugged and continued to glare at the empty cupholders.

“You say, ‘Thank you, I accept your apology,” Hannibal prompted him.

“Thank you, I accept your apology,” the omega parroted insincerely and almost too softly to hear.

Hannibal clenched his jaw but then decided that was good enough for a day like today and started the engine.

As they began to pull out of the parking lot, Will looked up and around suddenly asking, “Where’s Randall?”

“He had a little trouble and he needed to come early,” Hannibal explained.

“What did he do?”

“It’s not important,” Hannibal told him. “He’s been punished now so it doesn’t matter. When we get home you can spend some time with him before you do your homework. I think he would appreciate that.”

He watched in the mirror as the younger omega worked through his response.

“OK,” he said finally and then shifted across the seat so he could look out the window for the rest of the journey home.

---

When they got back, Will raced into the house as soon as the Alpha unclipped the lead. When he didn’t see his brother in any of the rooms downstairs he raced up to the bedrooms.

Hannibal let him go and started fixing their dinner. He had a pounding headache from all the driving and decided that a simple meal of sliced Mangalitsa salami, fried Haloumi and micro-greens on crostini and homemade elderflower sorbet would have to suffice.

While the cheese was sautéing, he checked his phone and saw that Jack had left four messages.

He had just about worked up the patience to listen to the first one when he felt Will tugging on his sleeve.

The pup looked up at him anxiously and said, “he has his heat again. You have to fix him.”

Hannibal turned off the burners and then followed Will up to the master bedroom. It didn’t make sense for Randall to have a two-day gap between surges in his heat and no other symptoms, so Hannibal guessed he was just moping and wanting some more attention.

The pup had rolled over sideways on the bed so his face was hidden between the edge of the mattress and the leather headboard. He was wrapped entirely in the duvet, hugging a pillow to his chest and all that Hannibal could really see was his very slow breath movements under the blanket.

The Alpha sat on the side of the bed and then reached around to feel his omega's forehead. It was clammy instead of feverish probably because he was wrapped up so heavily. Hannibal tried to pull the duvet away, but the omega clung on to it for dear life.

He sent Will to get a glass of water and tried to roll Randall over to get a better look at him. He didn't entirely manage but he did see that the omega was glassy eyed and flushed.

Hannibal sat back against the headboard and pulled the omega into his lap hoping that scenting his Alpha's pheromones would start to bring him out of it. Randall poked his head out of the blanket to rest it under Hannibal's neck and he willingly took sips from the water glass when Will returned with it but he still didn't respond to any questions or seem to be completely aware of his surroundings.

When nothing else seemed to be working, Hannibal decided he needed some food but when he went to lift the omega off the bed he started distress crying so loudly Hannibal put him back immediately.

"You need to eat something," Hannibal told him. "And you're not allowed to have food in my bed. I'm going to bring you downstairs and you can eat in my lap. How about that?"

The pup just rolled over against the headboard again and didn't respond.

Frustrated, Hannibal told Will to stay with his brother and text him if he got worse. Then he went down to his study to consult the omega manuals.

He was able to diagnose it as subdrop from his medical training but couldn't specifically remember all of the techniques recommended for dealing with it. In his practice, he worked almost exclusively with betas. He consulted half a dozen manuals and made a list of what to try.

When he went back upstairs he had his arms full. He saw that Will had managed to insert himself between Randall and the headboard and was making that trilling sound again with his forehead pressed against his brother's bare chest. Will was getting increasingly upset when he didn't get a response.

He asked the younger omega if there was any progress. The little omega glared daggers at him when he interrupted but then he shook his head no sadly.

"Why don't you go and do some homework? I have some treatments I can try with him," Hannibal said.

The younger omega protested a little but then left reluctantly, closing the door behind him.

Hannibal took his clothes off except for his boxer-briefs and climbed into the bed again. Skin-to-skin contact with his Alpha was supposed to be the standard treatment. He pulled the cocooned omega back into his lap and gradually managed to peel the duvet and pillow away from him by replacing it with contact with his arms, chest and legs and letting the pup scent him freely.

He encouraged the omega to take little sips from the hot cider he'd brought and then followed it with a few squares of chocolate.

With the blanket gone, the pup cooled down quickly and seemed slightly more alert but still unwilling to look up at him. Hannibal praised him frequently and then talked about random subjects so that the pup could hear his voice. He told him about Will and the music class and thought he could almost see a little smile.

The Alpha placed very gentle pressure with his hands and then mouth over the omega's claiming mark mindful that it was still healing. Then he moved them so that they were lying on their sides with Hannibal's upper arm and leg draped over the omega. He tilted them over a little more, placing gradually more of his weight onto the omega but making sure not to put any pressure on his tender backside. The purpose was simply to let the omega feel that he was there and looking after him.

Having exhausted his list of subdrop treatments, Hannibal was about to go downstairs to see if he could find any other ideas when the pup started giving a series of little hiccupping sobs which turned into a brief flurry of crying and apologies. When Hannibal renewed his reassurances and reminded him that he was forgiven, the omega turned to snuggle lightly into Hannibal's shoulder.

After a few minutes, the Alpha asked him "Are you hungry, Randall?"

"Yes, Alpha, starving" the pup responded quietly and Hannibal felt a surge of relief wash over him to hear his voice.

"Let's go downstairs and have some dinner then," the Alpha said standing and moving to pick his omega up.

But Randall continued to cling to the sheets and fuss when Hannibal tried to pick him up.

Hannibal decided to test a gentle command, "Stand up Randall."

After a second the pup stood up on top of the bed wobbling a little after lying down for so long.

Hannibal stepped over to the door and ordered him to, "Come over here."

The omega seemed to be genuinely trying but as soon as he got to the edge of the bed he couldn't seem to bring himself to step off it. Watching him hesitate half a dozen times and seeing that he was starting to get genuinely distressed again, Hannibal quickly told him "OK, lie down."

When the omega happily complied, Hannibal pulled the duvet over his waist, gave him a little peck on the forehead and said, "This one time and one time only…" before heading down to the kitchen.

He ran into Will two steps, pacing and glowering, outside the bedroom door and told him he could go in and keep his brother company. Will lit up again and ran in to see him.

The crostini would leave crumbs everywhere, so Hannibal packed away all the ingredients and tried to think of a dish that posed the absolute minimum risk to his 3,000 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets. He couldn't believe the omegas had him wrapped around their fingers like this in less than a week.

He came back up a little less than an hour later with his largest serving tray and two dishes in the middle of it.

He had Will sit back against the headboard and Randall lie on his side next to him to keep the pressure off his bruised rear. Then Hannibal spread towels around their necks and along both of their sides, behind them and over every other possible surface where crumbs could land.

Hannibal placed the tray over Will's legs and then sat cross legged on the other side lifting the lids from the two dishes. The omegas cried out at the same time:

"Tater tots!"

"Chicken nuggets!"

"No," Hannibal told them sternly. "This is an amuse-bouche of pommes darphin and deconstructed pollo alla parmigiana."

---

Hannibal let both pups sleep in his bed that night as well. Randall still wouldn't leave it no matter what and Will started to fret when Hannibal suggested he go back to his own room all night by himself.

In the morning, Will sprang up as soon as the alarm went off to get ready for school but Randall still melted down if Hannibal tried to get him out of bed. In addition, Randall was flinching like he was in pain even when there was no obvious contact with the deep purple bruises on his backside.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal finally asked him.

"I have to pee."

"The bathroom is right over there…"

Randall looked to the en suite door, looked to Hannibal again and then gave another deep wince.

"Don't you dare," Hannibal told him. "I can carry you if you want, but you are going to the en suite, not in the bed."

He moved to pick the omega up but when Hannibal tried to lift him the pup started grimacing, twisting around and then letting off distress cries in the characteristic omega tone that made it almost impossible for Alphas not to stop whatever they were doing and try to make it better.

“Fine,” the Alpha said putting him back down and distractedly picking up the first suitable thing he encountered on the mantle. He handed the pup a 18th century Imari porcelain vase, one of his least favorite of a large collection left to him by his uncle. Hannibal told him to make sure he didn’t spill anything and went down to consult his manuals again.

As he was desperately checking through the indexes at the back of each book, Will came in already dressed for school to beg for his breakfast.

Hannibal told him, “I’m very sorry Will, but your brother still isn’t well enough to go and I shouldn’t be away from him for so long in case he needs something. Give me five more minutes and I’ll come and make some breakfast for you. After that we can find some books for you to read instead.”

Will looked a little disappointed but didn’t protest instead taking off his vest and then scampering up to visit his brother.

There was nothing in any of the manuals that was even vaguely relevant. The only references he could find to omegas not wanting to get out of bed were bred pups becoming agoraphobic in the week or so before they whelped.

At the end of his wits, Hannibal picked up the phone to consult the most esteemed omega therapist in his circle of acquaintance.

“Hello, Dr Du Maurier. I’m very sorry to disturb you first thing in the morning but I need an emergency consultation.”

---

Bedelia was elegant even at seven o’clock in the morning. She was there so quickly Hannibal wondered if she slept in her Italian silk blouses.

“Hannibal,” she said simply as she came through the door.

“Dr. Du Maurier. Thank you so much for coming at such short notice,” they set quick kisses on alternate cheeks and then Hannibal offered her some fresh squeezed orange juice he had just made for the omegas.

“Not this morning,” she replied, “but perhaps some caffè macchiato if it’s not too much trouble and then I think it’s best if I see my new patient.”

They made light conversation about shared professional acquaintances over their coffees and then Hannibal gave her the background to the issue. The Alpha assembled a tray for Randall’s breakfast and then they went up together to bring it to him.

After sending Will downstairs to entertain himself, Hannibal fed the older omega while Bedelia introduced herself and asked him some simple questions about himself. Randall answered a little shyly but without significant reluctance.

“He doesn’t seem to be dropping,” she told Hannibal putting the back of one hand across the omega’s forehead. The pup sniffed curiously at the perfume from her wrists and Hannibal

began to have second thoughts about inviting another Alpha into his bedroom to examine his omega.

“He was last night but then he recovered after about two or three hours. The only problem now is that he won’t leave the bed.”

“Have you ever had this problem before Randall?”

He shook his head no.

“What does it feel like when you try to get out of bed?”

“Like I’m going to fall down. Or it’ll hurt.”

“He can’t even get out of the bed to relieve himself,” Hannibal added pointing to the vase Randall had left on the nightstand and which he was now avoiding looking at.

Seeing how ashamed he was, Bedelia smiled at him kindly and the pup seemed to relax a little. She took the vase off the nightstand and set it on the floor where it would be out of his line of sight. Then she opened her clutch and took out a pen to start recording notes but accidentally dropped it.

Before Hannibal could move to pick it up for her, she pulled a second pen out, held it up for him to see and then continued her questioning while scribbling into her embossed notepad. Despite his worry, Hannibal took a brief moment to admire her taste in stationery.

“How old are you Randall?”

“Fifteen.”

“Have you had your heat yet?”

Randall looked confused and said, “I… don’t think…”

“Yes,” Hannibal cut in. “He had his first one earlier this week.”

“Perhaps I can ask Randall a few questions in private. There’s some things I need to ask that he might be a little embarrassed to answer in front of his Alpha.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Hannibal replied. “He’ll be less anxious if I’m here.” He could see that the omega was already beginning to turn red and look around uncertainly. He was starting to regret ever calling the therapist for help.

“Very well. If you’ll please let him answer though I think the session will be more productive.”

Hannibal took a step back, unable to completely supress his resentment at the other Alpha thinking she knew better than he did how to handle the omega.

Bedelia turned back to Randall and continued with her usual urbane tone. “Did your Alpha fuck you during your last heat?”

The omega gulped and looked like he wanted to sink into the earth again.

“Go on, Randall” his Alpha tried to encourage him to get this over with as quickly as possible. “You can be honest. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about”

“I… I don’t know.”

“You don’t remember if he did or you don’t understand the question?”

“I don’t understand,” Randall was looking to his Alpha like he was afraid he would be in trouble so Hannibal rubbed his lower back to reassure him.

“Did your Alpha put his cock in your hole and then come in you?” Bedelia asked as if she wanted to know the time.

“I think that’s quite enough Dr Du Maurier…” Hannibal started to cross around the bed to escort her out but the therapist ignored him and looked directly at Randall instead.

“Do you know what those words mean, sweetheart?”

Hannibal looked down and was surprised to see that his omega was shaking his head no. He had assumed that a pup as old as he was would be familiar with at least the basic facts of life and realised that there was a lot more training they needed to do.

“Yes,” Hannibal cut in before she could ask another ridiculous question. “I mounted him during his last heat.”

Dr Du Maurier gave a secretive little smile and then leaned down to pick up her other pen. Now that they were on the same side of the bed, Hannibal noted with disgust that it had fallen into the vase.

Bedelia wiped off one end with a wet wipe while looking at the other. Then she held it up so that Hannibal could see the blue plus sign.

“Then congratulations,” she announced drolly. “You’re going to be a father.”

Chapter End Notes

I guess Bedelia walks around with unwrapped pregnancy tests in her bag. Whatever.

Abandoned tags: Stationery kink; Hannibal gets told

My Google search history:
"Pretentious Japanese vases"

"Pretentious blouses"
"Most pretentious coffee drink"

# Evolution

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal stood stunned for the better part of a minute while Bedelia enjoyed his rare discomfiture.

“Perhaps we can continue this discussion in your office,” she suggested.

Hannibal suddenly remembered that she was there and replied, “Yes, of course. We’ll be just downstairs. Stay here Randall.”

The pup rolled his eyes at him and then curled up under the blanket seeming not to have followed the therapist’s meaning and just relieved that the questions were finally over.

Down in the study, they found Will furiously poring over the omega training manuals Hannibal had left out on his desk.

“Out,” Hannibal told him a little more harshly than he intended. The younger omega jumped out of his seat and looked at the floor anxiously. The Alpha softened his voice a second later and told him to go play with his brother and make sure he was drinking enough water.

When the pup was gone, Hannibal made sure to lock the door to keep out prying ears and then sat in one of the leather armchairs across from Bedelia.

“I don’t know what to say,” he admitted.

“I hope this is good news at least.”

“Yes, just unexpected. It was my impression that most omegas are not fertile during their first heat.”

“It’s very unusual, but not unheard of,” she replied.

“And the manuals said something about gestational agoraphobia but I was under the impression that omegas only experienced it just before giving birth.”

“In the vast majority of cases yes, but in certain circumstances omegas can experience it at any time during the pregnancy.”

“And what circumstances are those?”

“It’s a form of anxiety disorder that sometimes manifests in young omegas when they are pregnant with their first cub. When an omega doesn’t understand what is happening to it, it’s instinct will be to find a safe place and try to conserve its energy until it understands the situation better. Because Randall hasn’t had the benefit of the omega training that most pups his age would have experienced or of a positive omega role model, his body doesn’t

understand the hormonal changes that it is going through either as a result of claiming or quickening with his first cub."

Hannibal tried not to lose his train of thought each time the word "cub" was mentioned but was finding it increasingly difficult.

"Claiming fundamentally rewires an omega's neural pathways so that he can only experience sexual and romantic fulfillment from his Alpha and obviously a first pregnancy results in a host of additional hormonal and physical changes. Both happening so close together is likely overwhelming Randall's ability to process them appropriately."

"This is quite fascinating, Dr Du Maurier. It's obvious that what I was taught in medical school is now somewhat dated."

"There's an excellent recent study out of Johns Hopkins that looks at the impacts of social isolation on feral omegas which cites several comparable examples. It supports what we have known for years, but did not have scientific evidence for before – that it is crucially important that omegas be properly supported through key changes of life stage."

"From an anthropological perspective, omegas evolved to live in large, mixed-age communities of a number of omegas claimed by a single socially and sexually dominant Alpha. The older omegas instinctively guide the younger ones. But in our modern society, traditional family structures have broken down. Hence the need for Omega Institutes, albeit with beta instructors instead. A poor substitute, I'm sure you'll agree. I'd be happy to send you a copy of the working paper if you would be interested."

"Yes, I would be very interested. But how long is the reaction going to last and how can I help Randall out of it?"

"It's difficult to say. The encouraging news is that he thinks of your bed as a safe place. It's obvious that bonding has been successful and that he instinctively trusts you. The next step would be to try to remove as many sources of anxiety from his life as possible. And part of doing that is ensuring that you are explaining to him what is happening to him in a way that he can understand. Starting with basic anatomy," she finished and he could swear he saw a shadow of a wink in her eye.

"So it has nothing to do with my punishing him?"

"Potentially the timing is coincidental, but anxiety around punishments can also be a contributing factor. Again, if an omega doesn't understand why he is being punished or feels the punishment is unfair for some reason, that his Alpha isn't listening to or doesn't care about his side of the story, or he doesn't understand what he needs to do next time to avoid another punishment that can all lead to anxiety which will trigger or worsen the condition."

"When he feels safer and more confident, he will no longer need to stay in bed or in the house. How long that takes will be up to you as his trainer."

"Well," Hannibal said. "You've given me some unexpected news and a great deal to think about. Thank you very much for your time Dr Du Maurier. I hope I can call on you again if I

have any more questions."

"Of course, Dr Lecter. I often find that it's the Alphas who are more in need of my assistance than their omegas."

---

After seeing Bedelia out, Hannibal went in a kind of daze to the wine cellar, ground his heel into the specific section of the floor that released the trap door and went downstairs into the basement.

The cool air from the freezers helped him to arrange his thoughts.

If he had to select the dominant emotion it was pride that his little omega had managed to quicken so easily. It was a good sign for the future, he thought. The timing was not ideal. He had not had the opportunity to bring his omega up to peak condition first. But some careful attention to his dietary intake should quickly compensate.

Hannibal picked out some liver for the folates and iron content. Checking his supplies, he could see that he was running somewhat low – particularly if he was feeding three, or rather four, now instead of just one.

He could see that he would be extremely busy, not just with the training and consulting work but with preparations for the cub. Perhaps it was time to refer some of his less interesting regular patients… That would also allow him to accelerate the training programme for his pups instead of having to drop them off at the Institute all the time.

He returned to the wine cellar and had just closed the trap when he noticed Will lurking at the door.

"Hello, Will," he said and then waited for the omega to explain himself.

"I was just looking for some juice… for Randall," the pup lied to him with a casual agility that suggested a significant amount of practice. ¬¬

"The juice is in the refrigerator," Hannibal told him. "There's nothing in here that is suitable for omegas to drink. In fact, I think this room should be out of bounds. The bottles are fragile and some are quite valuable. I don't want to see you or your brother in here again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alpha."

"I will punish you if you disobey me and also if you lie to me again."

"Yes, Alpha," the pup replied with a little gulp.

"I need to talk to Randall for a little while. If I let you pick out some books – within reason - from the library, will you be able to behave yourself?"

Will nodded enthusiastically. Hannibal put the meat in the refrigerator, ignoring the omega's inquisitive looks and led him back to the study.

When he had Will happily settled with an insect encyclopedia nearly as thick as the pup's arms, Hannibal went back upstairs to check on Randall.

The older omega was curled up in the duvet again but was facing out into the room. He looked more bored than confused and was tracing a pattern in the bolster with his finger.

Hannibal took the vase into the en suite, emptied it, gave it a quick wash and then took a shower.

After towelling off, instead of getting dressed he went back into the bedroom and sat on one side of the ottoman. As soon as he entered the room he was aware of the pup pretending not to watch him. The omega had never seen him naked before in full daylight and outside of the haze of his heat.

Hannibal leaned back and collected the pup under his arms. He gave a little whimper when the Alpha lifted him over the bolster but then relaxed when he was set down on his knees on the ottoman instead of on the floor.

"Dr Du Maurier suggested that we have a talk. She thinks you'll feel better and won't need to stay in bed all the time if I explain what I'm doing when I mount you."

He saw the omega turn beet red and then reached over to put his hand on the back of the pup's neck giving him an encouraging stroke. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about. You're a grown-up omega now and there's nothing wrong with understanding how your body works, or mine."

"Would you like me to show you?"

The pup hesitated for a second but then bent forward a little and nodded nervously.

Hannibal leaned back slightly so the omega could see him better. He took one of Randall's hands and brought it so it was gently holding up his slack cock. The little flutter of the omega's fingers - uncertain where to place them – sent a quick shiver up his spine.

"This is what my cock usually looks like," he explained. Randall gave him a darting uncertain look but was otherwise absorbed by the object directly in front of him.

Hannibal brought his hand up to enclose the omega's hand around his cock and then led him in a few gentle strokes that teased his foreskin down.

"You can touch my cock if you ask my permission first," Hannibal instructed him. "I won't always have time, but you're always allowed to ask."

He wasn't sure if the pup heard, however, because he was gazing open mouthed at his Alpha's swiftly reddening dome. Hannibal gave him a quick kiss on the temple.

“If you’re being a good boy, and I decide to mount you, my cock will start to get big and hard, like this.”

He led the pup’s hand in slightly longer and faster strokes. He smiled and gave a pleased little huff not only from the warm friction but from the look of intense concentration on his omega’s face as his cock began to stiffen.

“The part that feels the best is just under the head here and this little crease on the bottom side of it,” Hannibal lifted his cock up a little further and demonstrated with his other hand. “That’s what I want you to lick when I put it in your mouth.”

Randall looked a little startled, as if he wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly.

Hannibal smiled at him, lifted two of his fingers with his opposite hand and slid them into the pup’s open mouth.

“Cover your teeth with your lips. There you go just like that. Now hollow in your cheeks like you’re eating a popsicle. Good pup.” Hannibal pulled his fingers out and slid them under the omega’s hand so that the saliva could start to wet his shaft. “Now do that on my cock.”

Randall shifted forward a little falteringly. When he was close enough, Hannibal put a hand behind his head to guide him down gently. The pup accepted him delicately and then obediently began to lick at his frenulum and the rim of his glans.

Hannibal gave a slight groan and the pup stopped for a second to look at him. “That’s a good pup. You’re doing it exactly right,” the Alpha reassured him. “Lick the rest of it to get it nice and wet for me.”

While the pup was laving him down, Hannibal sucked on two of his own fingers briefly and the spit in his other hand. He stroked himself quickly a few more times with the spit to help things along and then brought the omega’s head down onto his cock, a little further this time.

“See how deep you can take it,” the Alpha instructed. Randall made it about halfway before starting to tense up.

“That’s a good pup, that’s a good start, move your tongue up a little to make it tighter, now suck a little, a little harder, breathe through your nose, now up and down, spiral around a little, that’s right…” Hannibal was finding it more and more difficult to concentrate on giving directions instead of on the accelerating puls¬¬es in his cock. ¬¬

He moved his arm around to gently rest on the omega’s lower back, and careful to avoid the most tender skin, he started to brush the tips of his fingers through the slick around the omega’s hole. Randall gave a little startled hum around his cock that was absolutely delicious and then went back to work.

“This is your hole,” Hannibal told him. “When I fuck you, this is where I put my cock. You make slick to make it easier for me to put it in.”

Randall gave a moan so long and hard Hannibal’s gut clenched.

He reached around again, one hand helping on the bottom of his shaft and the other guiding the omega's hand to gently bounce his scrotum in rhythm with the strokes on his cock.

His knot started to grow and Hannibal moved the pup's hand to it.

"Do you feel that?" Hannibal asked.

The pup tried unsuccessfully to nod and then to say "Umm-humm" with a mouthful of cock. Hannibal's knot almost doubled in size from the sensation.

"That's my knot. If you've been a very good pup, it will lock inside you for a while when I'm done and hold my come in you."

Hannibal saw the pup's forehead crease a little and he immediately added, "Don't worry, we're getting to that."

He let the omega get a little more practice sliding on his shaft and then gently guided him up and off so he was back on his knees with just his hand loose around his Alpha's knot. Hannibal showed him how to tighten it to provide the perfect amount of pressure, gave himself a rapid series of jerks and then came all over the back of his hand. The omega gave a little start and then leaned in closer to watch, wide-eyed but not at all frightened.

When Hannibal caught his breath again, he held his hand up for the pup to see. "That's my come," he showed him. "That's what I leave inside you when I mount you."

Hannibal was caught off guard and then thrilled when, unprompted, the pup started licking it off his hand. He didn't seem thrilled with the taste initially but he dutifully licked up a good amount and then sat back on his knees smiling contentedly at his Alpha.

Hannibal supressed the urge to bend him back and ravage him and instead gave him a hard kiss on the cheek and a quick pet behind the ear. He went into the en suite to wash his hand off and wipe it with a towel. When he turned, he was thrilled to see the omega had followed him to the door. He sat on the edge of the tub and signalled the pup to come over and sit on his lap. Randall obeyed without any hesitation.

Hannibal gave him a lengthy series of deep kisses as the omega squirmed happily in his lap. From the fluttering motions on his unconstrained knot, Hannibal let out a few more quick spurts of come onto the side of his omega's thigh.

When the Alpha released him for a second, Randall scooped it up to look at it more closely.

"What is it?"

"It's millions and millions of little seeds that can make a cub start to grow in your belly," Hannibal replied giving him a fond rub there and kissing him again. "In fact, you have my cub growing in there right now."

Randall seemed not to have heard or understood him at first. "A cub, like a baby?"

“Yes,” Hannibal told him with another long kiss to the forehead. “You were a very good pup during your first heat and quickened with a cub for me.”

“But I’m not an omega,” Randall blurted out.

Chapter End Notes

Dammit, Kinky Sex Ed Scene - you were only supposed to be a few paragraphs long. I absolutely swear to God that the next chapter actually advances the plot.

Also, come on Hannibal! Read your alumni newsletter!

# Interruption

Hannibal noticed that Randall had frozen in his lap before he registered what the pup had said.

He saw Randall eying the door and wrapped one arm around his knees and the other around his stomach.

“It’s all right Randall. You’re not in trouble. I just want to have a talk. Did you say you’re not an omega?”

Randall nodded after a few seconds of frantically trying to think of an alternative.

“What are you then?”

“An Alpha?”

“Are you asking me?” Hannibal asked smiling at him and giving him another quick kiss to reassure him. He was relieved to see that the pup was confused, not convinced.

“My sire told me.”

“But you’re not sure if it’s true?”

“How could he be wrong about it?” Randall shifted a little so he could look the Alpha directly in the eyes.

“I don’t know… But I don’t think we need to worry about him right now. We just need to look at the facts and draw a conclusion that we can both live with moving forward. Do you want to try it?”

“Okay.”

“Do you feel like an Alpha?”

“I don’t know. What does it feel like?”

Hannibal smiled and after a moment of thought said, “I don’t know. That’s a good question… I suppose when I was your age sometimes I would think about finding an omega and mounting them. I even had dreams about it. Is that something you think or dream about?”

Randall tried to remember and then shook his head no cautiously.

“Do you think about sex at all?”

The pup’s blush answered for him.

“What do you think about?”

“With you.”

“With me on top?”

Randall nodded, still too embarrassed to make eye contact. “Yes, with your cock in my hole.”

Hannibal smiled warmly and gave him another quick kiss.

“And that feels good? You like it? There’s no other way you think you would like it more?”

“Yes… but if I’m an Alpha isn’t it bad?”

“Not necessarily. If we are both enjoying it the way we like it the most, how can it be bad?”

He paused for a moment to let the pup take that on board.

“Do you think about it a lot?” Hannibal asked with a microscopic smirk, unable to resist the brief digression.

“Yes,” Randall nodded looking up at him. “All the time. I can’t think about anything else hardly.”

“Then to summarise the facts there’s a DNA test that says you’re an omega, you had a heat, you passed a pregnancy test, you don’t have a knot, you get slick, I’m a doctor and I saw omega reproductive organs on your ultrasound, and you prefer sex in an omega position.”

Randall nodded along, his brow furrowing.

“But on the other hand, your sire thought you were an Alpha for some reason.”

The pup sat expectantly waiting for his Alpha to come to a conclusion.

“I can’t make your mind up for you, Randall,” Hannibal told him. “You’re the only one who knows how you really feel. I just want to say that it doesn’t matter to me either way. You’re mine now, just as much as the cub inside you. If you think you’re an Alpha, then you’re my Alpha. And if you accept that you’re an omega, that can mean whatever you need it to mean.”

Hannibal wanted to sit with him a little longer and answer any questions but he could hear the doorbell ringing downstairs.

Cursing the intruder silently, he carried the pup back to the bed and told him he would be up again shortly in he had anything else he wanted to talk about. It was probably for the best to give him a little time to sit and think about it.

Hannibal pulled some clothes on and then went to answer the door.

Downstairs he saw Will hovering near the front entrance unsure of whether he should or even how to open the door. Hannibal directed him back up to the guest bedroom with his book. Once he’d locked the door, he want back downstairs to answer the persistent ringing.

Jack walked through the door as soon as it opened with a manila case file in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

“If Muhammed won’t come to the mountain, then the mountain must come to Muhammed.”

He held out the wine for Hannibal who accepted it graciously.

“A Gantenbein pinot noir… Swiss.”

“A peace offering,” Jack said coming into the kitchen and placing the file on the counter. “I won’t apologise for my enthusiasm for catching these sons of bitches but sometimes it makes me forget that there can be more important things in life… like family.”

“Yes,” Hannibal replied, lifting the bottle in a casual salute. “Every day I appreciate a little more how important it can be.”

“That reminds me. My omega, Bella, keeps asking me to invite you over for dinner. Ever since I brought home some of those macarons you shared with the office she has been begging me to arrange a dinner party. I can’t promise anything as amazing as what you probably make every night for yourself, but we would certainly enjoy your company.”

“That would be wonderful,” Hannibal replied. “I would be very honoured to meet your famous Bella.”

“Sometime next week then,” Jack concluded.

After a decent pause, he continued, “Now, about the case…”

And here we go, Hannibal thought.

“I’m not sure if you had time to review the case file…”

“Only briefly, I am intending to study it in more detail this afternoon.”

“I think the best place to start is with interviewing the coworkers to see if anything shakes loose.”

“That would certainly seem sensible. Perhaps we can set the meetings up for next week. I can send you an updated schedule with my availability.”

“That was my next thought. Unfortunately, when I called the lab manager he told me that even with our security clearances we would need a specific approval from the Department of Defence to enter the facility, interview anyone that works there or review the copy of their security protocols or the tapes that I requested.”

“I thought Dr Katz said it was just a nutritional sciences lab.”

“Obviously, that’s some kind of cover. I think the theory about identity theft, perhaps by some kind of foreign agent, is now more likely. But we can’t rule out that the killings are unrelated to whatever is going on in that lab. Until we do, I was hoping you could work up a

profile based on whatever you can deduce from the crime scenes. It could take weeks to get the clearances we need from DoD. They seem much less concerned about four bodies getting cold and a serial killer or rogue agent running loose than covering their own asses. But in the meantime, let me know if you need me to arrange any site visits."

"That sounds fine."

Hannibal saw the other Alpha out, then brought the case file to his desk and opened it to the first page.

After skimming a few words, he closed the file and went up to check on Randall realising that he was still too preoccupied with the morning's events to concentrate.

He was pleased to see that the pup was kneeling in one of the armchairs staring into the empty fireplace instead of stuck back in the bed again.

Hannibal came over to sit on the ottoman. He beckoned Randall to come sit in his lap again, which he did willingly. He scented his pup's hair and was surprised to find that it had acquired a richer but more serene fragrance.

Finally breaking the silence, the Alpha asked, "Did you have some more time to think, Randall, about whether you're really an Alpha or an omega?"

"I don't know…" he replied with his face half buried in Hannibal's chest. "I just want to be your omega."

# Division

Will sat on a bench in the exercise yard tracing lines with a stick and waiting for his brother to be released from class and join him. He'd been waiting for more than a week to have a chance to talk to him in private.

At first Randall wouldn't leave the Alpha's bedroom. Then he wouldn't come downstairs. Then he'd happily putter around the house but wouldn't go outside. And finally Hannibal let them go out into the garden for about ten minutes but with him watching them all the time.

Will did see that some of the neighbours' houses had windows that overlooked parts of the garden from a distance but it was the middle of the day and nobody seemed to be at home in any of the other houses.

At least the Alpha had let Will go to school on his own for the rest of that week once he was comfortable leaving Randall alone for an hour or two. He had wanted to tell Randall to take advantage of the time he was there alone to build up the stockpile of supplies Will had started under the sink of one of the other guest bedrooms but he never seemed to have a second alone with him.

Randall wasn't making it any easier. Even when he didn't have to, he would go sit in the Alpha's lap and whisper something to him and then they'd disappear again. Almost every night, the Alpha would spend ages trying to teach Randall how to read and Will would have nothing to do. And more often than not his brother would sleep in the other room now without him. The only advantage of all the time on his own with the Alpha distracted was that it made it easy for Will to steal food, money and all the other things they'd need when they ran away.

It was more a question of when and how. It would be a lot easier to escape from the Institute than from the Alpha's house, where all the doors and windows were always locked and the Alpha was almost always there walking in on them at the worst possible moment.

At the Institute, they weren't escorted from class to class, just expected to turn up on time. He had overheard the Alpha telling the director when he picked them up the day before that there was a day next week when he needed to drop them off for six hours and could he arrange a lunch break for them with the rest of the omegas in the cafeteria. That would potentially give them a forty- or fifty-minute window when they wouldn't immediately be missed.

There were a few guards but they were mostly for the dorms at night and to keep stray Alphas out instead of the omegas in. Most of the sheep-like omegas who had tried to befriend Will were happy to stay and looking forward to being sold off.

If they climbed out the windows from the students' bathroom in the social refinement wing it was only a short dash to the tree line and in the blindspot of the guards at the doors on either end.

The real problem was there wasn't really any way to bring their supplies with them to the school. Will had snuck some more normal clothes under his vest to hide in the bathroom ceiling panels and he would probably be able to sneak most of the money and maybe some small valuables like cufflinks in the same way on the day they went but there was no way to bring bulkier practical necessities like shoes or food.

He didn't know how deep the forest was on that side of the Institute. When they drove in it was always from the opposite direction. He didn't want to double back and go out towards the highway since that seemed like an easy way to get caught, but he didn't want to strand them barefoot, hungry and lost in the woods either.

They'd just have to trust their luck though. Anything would be better than staying cooped up in that house for one second longer than they had to.

Will looked up to see Randall coming into the yard with Mr Budge, his piano teacher, right behind him. The tutor had his hands on both of the omega's shoulders. Randall was hunched a little like he wanted to shake the hands off but didn't quite dare.

Will stood up and hurried over to meet them.

"Are you sure you don't want me to call your Alpha?" the tutor was saying with concern.

"No thank you, Mr Budge" Randall replied without looking up. "He's already on the way to pick us up and he won't be able to get here any faster if you do."

"What's wrong?" Will asked.

"Just a little stomach bug," Mr Budge reassured Will while patting Randall a fraction of a hair above his ass. Randall gave a little shudder and then did pull away from what remained of the tutor's grip.

"Why don't you sit down, boys, and we can all wait until he gets here?"

"We're supposed to do the circuit," Will reminded him pointing to the various exercise devices spread around the yard while giving his brother a pointed look. "Our Alpha signed us up for it because he was going to be late again."

"Your brother isn't feeling well Will, so why don't you do the exercises and we can sit here and watch?"

"No, that's OK," Randall cut in. "I feel a lot better and I want to do the circuit with Will. We're supposed to spot each other."

The tutor clenched his jaw for a second but then said, "If you're sure, pup. There's no need to put on a brave face for my benefit."

Randall followed Will to the first station making a face at him as soon as their backs were turned. Thankfully, the tutor just sat on the bench and started reading a newspaper instead of following them. He kept watching them over the top of the paper but he was too far away to

hear anything, particularly when they faced the other way. They wouldn't have much time though because Randall had been so late and the Alpha would be there soon to pick them up.

"I know how we can get away," he whispered to his brother as they did stretches to warm up.

Randall paused for longer than Will was expecting before saying, "How?"

"Next week when we're here all day. I have some money we can hide in our vests in the morning while he's in the shower. Then all we have to do is meet in the bathroom in the social refinement wing instead of going to the cafeteria at lunch time."

They switched to the next piece of equipment where they could sit back to back while pushing bars together around their shoulders.

"I don't have an excuse to go to the social refinement wing," Randall said finally.

"Well make something up," Will hissed at him impatiently. "If anyone asks you, just say you're there to meet me."

"Where are we going to go though?"

"Out the window. Into the woods."

"And do what?"

"I don't know. We'll sort it out."

They switched to the next station, wooden benches where they could do push ups with their heads close to each other.

Randall seemed to be on the verge of saying something else before changing his mind.

"That's a terrible plan Will."

"Well I don't hear you coming up with a better one."

"I don't see why we can't…"

"Don't even say it."

"He's not that bad."

"Get back to me when your ass isn't still purple from him beating the shit out of you a week ago."

As they stood up to go to the next station, he could see from the expression on his brother's face that he'd gone too far.

"Look I'm sorry. He's not an absolute monster, the food is good, the house is amazing and for some reason you have a crush on him. But we didn't choose to live there. He bought us. So nothing else we ever do there will ever be us choosing to do it. I don't see how you think you

can live like that… just mooching around being someone else's pet. Not allowed to ever go anywhere or do anything. You used to get pissed off for days if dad made you sit in the back of the van. But Dr Lecter snaps his fingers and you roll over to show him your belly. And you're happy to do it!"

Randall paused, obviously trying to think of even more excuses instead of actually listening to anything Will was trying to tell him. Will could see that they were running out of time. The Alpha had come into the yard and was walking over to greet Mr Budge but his eyes were fixed on them the whole time.

"I just don't see the point of running away if we're not sure we'll end up somewhere better. There could be creeps or something out there. Or wild animals. Or he could catch us and get mad and give us back to the Institute."

Now the Alpha was signalling for them to come over in that ridiculous manner of his – like he was royalty and assumed they were doting subjects.

"Just wait Will. We can come up with a better plan. I don't see what the hurry is. And he's really not that bad if you would just..."

"Over my dead body," Will hissed at him as they came within earshot and lost their opportunity to discuss the matter further.

# Exertion

He was that bad and Will was going to prove it. That Friday night the Alpha was having dinner at his boss's house. Will knew he was hiding something in the wine cellar and with a few hours in the house alone he was going to find some evidence and then show Randall how wrong he was.

The Alpha spent the whole endless afternoon making cannoli and sfogliatella from scratch. To avoid suspicion and the risk that the doctor would decide they needed a sitter after all, Will volunteered to stir the custard and even let him feed him a bit on a spoon. It tasted mind-blowingly amazing – at least one reaction that Will didn't have to fake.

"I'll leave some in the refrigerator," the Alpha told him. "If you two behave yourselves while I'm away you can have them after lunch tomorrow."

Then he went up to his bedroom and spent about an hour and a half getting dressed. Randall and Will lay on their stomachs on the bed watching him in the en suite and snickering to each other as the Alpha spent at least ten minutes brushing his hair until not a single one was out of place.

Afterwards, he brought them downstairs, hand fed them smoked salmon mini quiches (at last a break from liver!) and cubes of cantaloupe wrapped in ham. Then he let them curl up next to him on the sofa while he read for a little until it was time to leave.

Randall fell asleep almost at once curled up with his back along one of the Alpha's thighs. It wasn't even six in the evening but he seemed to get tired at weird times now. Will lay with his head resting on the Alpha's other leg and let him give occasional strokes of his hair while he turned pages.

After an interminable length of time, the Alpha put his book down. He gently lifted Will's shoulders up so he was sitting up instead of leaning on him. Randall was still asleep, so he rubbed his belly with one hand and stroked up the hairs on the back of his neck with the other.

Randall gave a kind of purring moan that Will couldn't help rolling his eyes at and then half opened his eyes without otherwise moving. The Alpha stood up, turned around and knelt down again until he was looking directly at them.

"I'm trusting you two to behave yourselves while I'm gone," the Alpha told them. "You can watch TV, play games or read the books I've left up in your room until eight but then I want you to go to bed with the lights out. I will be back before ten. If you have any problems, I expect you to text me immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alpha," they told him in unison.

"Good pups," he told them kissing them each on the forehead and then leaving them there.

Randall was asleep again almost before the front door shut, so Will leapt off the sofa and made a beeline for the wine cellar. He could remember the corner he'd seen the Alpha standing in with a vacuum wrapped package of meat in his hand. Will didn't think it had come from either of the kitchen refrigerators or from the one in the pantry.

In the wine cellar, he started tapping with his foot in the area where he remembered seeing the Alpha.

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Jack was even more wired than usual when he answered the door.

"The son of a bitch is at it again! Nothing for months and then two in as many days," He was practically rubbing his hands together with excitement.

"Good evening, Jack," Hannibal replied inviting himself in and handing the director the box full of pastries.

"And he's getting more ambitious, which means he'll get sloppier. Gas station attendants and book store clerks aren't good enough for him anymore. This time it's a college football star and some computer startup millionaire."

"You'll have to excuse me, what are we discussing?"

"The Chesapeake Ripper is back. Dr. Katz's team is sure of it. He took the football player out of a frat house with thirty other residents sleeping right next door."

"Jack," a voice called with soft disapproval and they both turned to see an elegant omega standing in the doorway. "You promised not to discuss business tonight."

"Of course. It's unforgivably rude of me. Dr. Lecter, please allow me to introduce my omega, Bella. Bella, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter."

"I wanted for so long to meet you," she said coming forward and offering her hand, which Hannibal lifted and kissed. "Jack talks all the time with such admiration for your unique gifts."

"Likewise, but of course words could never do you justice. Your scent, for example is exquisite – like a bolt of lightning."

The omega gave a modest little blush and then led them into the dining room where a series of tasteful floral bouquets led the eye to roam across an assortment of equally carefully arranged dishes.

"She's been working on it all week," Jack told him, giving the omega an affectionate kiss which his unassuming spouse put on a mild show of embarrassment about.

"Of course, I'm almost ashamed to be serving it to you," the omega continued for him. "Your reputation proceeds you, obviously."

“It all looks wonderful,” Hannibal told her sincerely. “Although I must admit I’m perplexed at how you found such bright chrysanthemums so late in the season.”

“I grow them myself,” she explained as Jack fiddled with the stereo until some soft jazz music filled in the background.

“Bella is a magician in the garden,” Jack told him. “Give her a trowel, a patch of dirt and a few months and you won’t know where you are.”

“Well, we’re very lucky with the microclimate here. So much of the garden is south facing, I can grow all my favourites from my childhood in Savannah – even flowers I never thought I’d be able to grow for myself again after we moved to DC.”

They continued with pleasant, light conversation as they moved through the hors d’oeuvres and on to the entrees. Bella was a very gifted amateur and Hannibal did not have to struggle to find things to complement.

“What about you, Dr Lecter,” Jack was asking him. “Have you ever thought about settling down yourself?”

“With an omega?”

“Or a beta. I just assumed a man with such classical tastes in other areas would prefer an omega. And, of course, you would want at least some of your cubs to be Alphas.”

“I suppose I hadn’t really thought about it. My work keeps me so busy… on the other hand time is not on any of our sides. If anything could inspire me, though, I’m sure it’s seeing what a wonderful home life you two have.”

Jack gave a broad smile and kissed his omega again. She also smiled but with a slight thinness that Hannibal found intriguing.

“We shouldn’t put you on the spot though and I’ve been dying to try those cannoli all night,” she said rising to retrieve them from the kitchen.

While she was away, Jack took the opportunity to lean over and say, “Since there’s not much more progress we can make on the Banjos case until we get security clearance, I was hoping you could have a look at the Ripper case files in the meantime.”

“My patient load is very heavy at the moment,” he replied. “I’m reluctant to commit more time if I’m not really able to spare it… but perhaps if you send me the file I will see if I can find some time to review it. Without promising anything, of course.”

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It took Will the better part of an hour to find the catch release for the trap door. Once he had opened it, he felt a sense of dread start to sink in the pit of his stomach. He could feel cold air wafting up from the basement and a very faint musty scent he couldn’t quite place but which made him uneasy.

He thought about running to wake up Randall first so that they could explore the secret rooms together but then he reasoned it would be better to find whatever there was to find first and then decide when and how to break it to him. Otherwise he could waste precious time debating with his brother whether they should go down there at all.

Having made up his mind, Will went cautiously down the steps feeling along the bricks to his right for some kind of light switch. He found one at the bottom and flicked it on wincing from the sudden brightness of the numerous flickering fluorescent bulbs.

The basement was absolutely enormous with a series of large chambers down a long corridor divided by thick soundproofed walls. The first was an industrial freezer almost as large as the study and about a quarter full of vacuum-packed bags of meat and sides of mutton.

The next chamber looked like a butcher's shop with a standing bandsaw, various sizes of meat slicers, commercial-sized smokers and dehydrators, scales and sausage grinders.

Then there was a wood and metal-working shop, a chemistry lab, a room with a lot of old medical equipment in it and then several storage rooms full of dusty paintings, sea chests full of God-knows what, suits of armour, taxidermy, stuffy old furniture that looked like it belonged in a museum and mountains of old clothes.

Will was about to give up for the night. It was all strange but none of it proved anything, except that the Alpha had more money than sense, had a lot of hobbies and was kind of a pack rat. Maybe there was something in one of the chests - incriminating letters or something - but it would take days to dig through all of them.

He sighed with disappointment as he moved on to the last room, then gave a little gasp when he walked in.

He had to turn around for a second to check that he was still in the basement. The last room, or rather it was a small suite of rooms, was a perfectly decorated bedroom that wouldn't have been out of place in any of the rest of the house except for the lack of windows.

There was a normal double bed which had even been made and wasn't even dusty, a big antique wardrobe, area rugs, wallpaper, a bookcase full of books, three reading chairs and a coffee table.

Will felt the hairs on the back of his neck raise as he went into the bathroom which was also oversized and richly appointed. Before he could take in all the detail of the other fittings, his attention was drawn to the large square spa tub which had something sitting at the bottom of it.

Walking closer, Will could see it was a large grey teddy bear with a red bow wrapped around its neck. He leaned in to examine it and then started when he heard the bedroom door slam shut behind him.

# Persuasion

Hannibal wasn't able to resist pulling over after he left the Crawfords' house to check the surveillance video.

He smiled slightly as he watched his younger omega throwing a very energetic tantrum against the door of the trap room. He had made sure ahead of time that there was nothing in the room that the pup could use to injure himself or anyone else. Spending a little time alone there would help him understand the consequences of disobeying and sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

Hannibal switched over to the room controls, turned off the lights and heat for the trap room, turned on the strobe lights for the room opposite which would be just visible through the crack around the door and activated the sound recording which played brief power tool noises, bits of newscasts and predator calls at random intervals.

By morning the pup should be ready for a long overdue talk.

The Alpha finished driving home and then went to find his well-behaved omega still sound asleep on the settee where he had left him.

He lifted him up, fancying that he even felt a little heavier no matter how unlikely that was after only two weeks.

The pup curled into him and mumbled something that sounded like an apology.

"What's that?" the Alpha asked fondly.

"Sorry… not bed."

"That's fine, pup," Hannibal told him kissing his temple. "I want you to rest wherever you feel tired."

He brought the omega up to his bed and left him there on top of the covers while he washed up and took off his clothes.

When he came back, he lay down facing the pup and started kissing him softly but urgently. Randall gave sleepy little moans and started rolling onto his belly.

"'Swill?" he mumbled when his Alpha let him up for air.

"He's sleeping in the other bedroom tonight," Hannibal told him. "I want you to stay here with me."

He brushed at and stretched the omega's hole to get his slick flowing and then mounted him with long, languid strokes enjoying the change of pace. Usually Randall would be begging

and goading him to go harder but now he seemed content to let the Alpha enjoy him at his leisure.

He realised about halfway through that he'd forgotten to put the cock cage on. The pup was erect and grinding himself against the sheets in rhythm with Hannibal's thrusts but not with any particular urgency.

"Good boy," he told him. "If I leave your cage off do you think you can hold off coming until I knot you?"

Randall creased his brow and nodded "mmm."

Hannibal started to slowly pick up the pace until he reached the tempo he needed. The pup was a little more awake, starting to groan and possibly to regret his promise.

The Alpha reached around to stroke him a few times and his omega began to obviously struggle, biting at the sheets and clenching them in his fists.

Finally Hannibal took pity on him, clasped the omega's organs snugly between his thumb and forefinger while he settled his knot and gave his last few thrusts. He released his fingers as he came and was rewarded with the pup's orgasm wrapping around his own.

"Such a good pup," Hannibal told him stroking down his belly as he turned them onto their sides. "Jūs visada taip stengiatės, kad esate toks geras berniukas man."

His omega didn't reply but just snuggled back against him, signalling that if it was all the same to his Alpha, he just wanted to be held until he fell asleep again.

Hannibal was happy to oblige.

After a few hours, he woke up again. He was pleased to see that the omega was so far under he didn't even stir when Hannibal crawled out of bed.

There were a few quick jobs to take care of and then he would have his talk with Will. He turned the lights back on in the trap room and cancelled the sounds and strobe lighting. Then he went around to all the spots where Will had been stashing things and confiscated them.

Finally he went downstairs to retrieve the omega.

He found Will curled up in a corner of the room with both arms wrapped around a pillow over his head, trembling and whimpering softly. As soon as he felt Hannibal's hand on his shoulder, he gave a little start, rolled over, grasped the Alpha around the neck and started crying convulsively.

Hannibal lifted him up, shushing and trying to soothe him as he carried him up to the study. The Alpha settled into one of the leather chairs with Will in his lap and patiently let him cry until he was down to some light sniffling.

"Is there anything you want to tell me Will?"

After a moment, the omega untangled himself from the Alpha's arms and then went to sit in the armchair opposite him wiping the last tears away with his forearm. He was still very pale but had recovered some of his self-composure.

"What is that room for?"

"This house was built by my uncle many years ago when he first lived in America. His lover was a member of the Japanese aristocracy and she had a maid who lived with them. His omega consort was very old fashioned about where servants should sleep, so they built some quarters for her in the basement next to the butler's pantry where she could have some privacy."

"But then why was the bed made if they haven't lived here for years?"

"Because I had a suspicion you would disobey me and I didn't want you to be uncomfortable while you learned your lesson. I'm sorry Will but this is a very old house and even I don't know every nook and cranny. I admire your inquisitive spirit very much, but if you insist on following it places you've been told you're not allowed to go there is a risk you could be very badly hurt. And what kind of Alpha would I be if I allowed that to happen?"

"Not a very good one," Will told him bitterly.

"Will," Hannibal said pausing until the pup made brief eye contact with him. "I'm sorry that we've gotten off on the wrong foot and that I've had to spend so much more time with Randall for the past few weeks because of his condition. I really do think that we could become good friends…"

"How are we supposed to become 'good friends' when you bought us for breeding stock?"

"I don't think of omegas as 'breeding stock'. A good Alpha-omega relationship is about companionship… about creating a stable home where cubs will be happy and healthy and everyone is getting what they really need."

"Like Randall really needed you to beat the crap out of him and you really needed to terrorize me for hours…"

"First of all, I didn't 'beat the crap' out of your brother. I punished him. Perhaps more harshly than I should have, but we're all learning what the other ones need all the time and we don't always get it exactly right, especially in the beginning. Still, if I hadn't done anything, guilt would have caused him to drop anyway. I didn't punish him because I enjoyed it; I did it so that he could forgive himself and feel the security that omegas feel from having clear boundaries."

"Do you think what you really need is to be allowed to run around wherever you like being disobedient and disrespectful to the Alpha that is putting a roof over your head, feeding you three meals a day and paying extortionate fees for your education? Why would I be all doing that if I thought you were just 'breeding stock'? I have the dungeon already, why not just lock you in it until you're old enough? More or less any other Alpha that bought you would do exactly that."

“But the point is you *bought* us…” Will spat.

“I don’t make the rules,” Hannibal said. “If there were some other way for you and your brother to be here willingly, then I would choose that way. But there isn’t. And your only other choices are to go back to the Institute or to be split up from your brother and put in foster care with another Alpha who will almost certainly treat you worse. Unfortunately, there’s no magic fairy land, Will, where omegas your age run free and wild and get to make all their own choices. Even if you did manage to run away, you wouldn’t last two weeks before being captured again. There is nowhere else for you to go.”

“I’ll make a deal with you though, if it’s the payment part that’s bothering you so much. You stay here and accept my authority and keep your brother company until you’re old enough to find a mate and then you can have a choice. You don’t have to mate with me if you don’t want to. You can choose someone else or no one if that’s what you really want. I’m your legal guardian now so I can emancipate you when you’re 18 if I choose to and if that’s what you really want.”

“Can you emancipate Randall too?”

“We’re already bonded. He’s my mate. That’s what he chose. So it looks like one way or another we are going to have to find a way to live with each other. But strangely enough I don’t really want to be bonded to someone who doesn’t want to be bonded to me so if, when you’re all grown up, you decide to go your own way, then you have my word that I will let you.”

“Okay,” Will said after a few moments of consideration.

“Okay?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Let’s start again then, shall we?”

# Reception

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took another month and a fifth employee turning up dead in a park before the DoD approved security passes for Hannibal and Dr. Katz to interview the other staff at the lab.

Today they were on their way to meet Dr. Adam Bevier, a moderately distinguished gastrophysiologist who had graduated from Johns Hopkins several years before Hannibal began there and who he knew slightly by reputation but had never met.

Hannibal flipped through his case notes and his copies of Dr. Bevier's most recent articles to distract himself from Dr. Katz's somewhat eccentric driving.

As they neared the gate to the facility, for example, Dr Katz swung over to the wrong lane and rolled down her window to address someone sitting in a parked car on the shoulder facing the other direction.

Hannibal looked up sharply to see it was a younger woman with corkscrewing red hair who was sitting in her car watching the entrance to the lab through her rearview mirror and making notes on a steno pad.

"Hello, Freddie," Dr Katz shouted out waving to her. "Who's professional reputation are you destroying today?"

"I just report the facts," the young woman responded evenly. "I leave it to the FBI to worry about reputations. Speaking of which… five workers dead at the same lab and it takes three months before the BAU even starts interviews? To be fair though, getting a new Ripper case every three or four days must be keeping you all on your toes. It's certainly keeping me on mine. I do assume that you're planning to catch him before the entire city is depopulated?"

"Dr. Katz," Hannibal interrupted. "I believe this gentleman is signalling he would like to get past."

He pointed her towards a man in a car exiting the facility who was leaning halfway out his window and shouting at them for blocking his lane.

"Later Freddie," Dr Katz called as she pulled back into the correct lane and continued on to the gate.

"All the people that come past my table and it's never the ones you really want to see," she mused as she handed their clearances to the guard.

They were met at the front door by a young receptionist who pressed a thumb to a panel to open it. She offered them coffee, which they politely declined, and then led them through a complex maze of offices and lab spaces and stairwells until they arrived at the correct wing.

Hannibal noticed she used the fingerprint on her index finger to get past the reception area and her middle finger to enter the correct wing.

“Do you need all of your fingers to access this lab?” he asked her.

“Just the first three,” she replied with a little shudder, obviously following his meaning. “Only the people that work in this wing and the receptionists have access. Then you need the ring finger to open each person’s specific office and any of their personal cabinets or drawers.”

“So if someone had those fingers, they could get as far as the wing, but not into the right office?”

“Yes, but the new security protocol is that as soon as anybody is reported missing, the whole lab goes into lockdown, the lab manager does a roll call and then they cancel the security clearances for anyone that is missing. So even if someone killed them for their fingers, they wouldn’t work anymore. And the manager has reviewed all of the security tapes and said they couldn’t find any evidence of someone suspicious trying to break in.”

They stopped at a plain looking steel door with a nameplate reading “Dr. Bevier”. The receptionist pushed a button and a very faint buzzing sound could be heard on the other side of the door.

It was answered a few moments later by a pudgy man in his mid-fifties wearing a white lab coat. He was sweating profusely, although his lab and office were relatively cool. He wiped his palm on the side of his coat before offering it to them.

“Dr. Katz, Dr. Lecter,” he said shaking their hands with enthusiasm. “The lab manager, Dr. Thompson, asked me to clear some time in my schedule to talk with you. I’m so sorry about the mess everywhere. Deadlines, you know. Not that it isn’t terrible what’s been happening. I don’t know how much I can help. I tend to just keep my head down and in my work. But, of course, anything I can do…”

As he spoke, he circled around his desk which was piled more than a foot high in places with stacks of papers, open books, abandoned Chinese take-out and pizza boxes, small plastic carrier boxes for mice and petri dishes. His hip knocked the corner of one stack and threatened to tip it over but he managed to catch everything and push it back into place first.

Unlike the desk area, the main part of the lab was spotless and in good order. One wall was covered with refrigeration units filled with stacked petri dishes and the other with mouse cages. The sound of their spinning exercise wheels and occasional squeaks permeated the rest of the conversation. A third wall had a floor to ceiling window looking down into the office park below.

“Did you know the victims very well?” Hannibal asked as he settled into one of the guest chairs across the desk from the researcher.

“I knew Rachel Anthony, the first receptionist… Just to say hello to really and some small talk at office parties. Really lovely woman. Everyone adored her. She was here for about ten

years. Her replacement, only a few weeks. I think her name was Sarah, no Andrea? Dr. Hanks, I would sometimes have lunch or coffee with. His office is down at the end of the hall. He was always trying to give away spare pots of honey, which my wife adores. We all avoided Dr. Pickering so we didn't have to hear about her work. Hers is the next office over. And now this latest one was on the cleaning crew? I'm afraid they come in overnight so we almost never see them."

"Can you think of any reason why anyone would want to kill them?" Dr. Katz followed up.

"No. I mean, no. Anyone would tell you Dr. Pickering wasn't the easiest person to live with, but I can't see why anyone would kill all of them. On the other hand, I barely knew most of them."

"Are you concerned that your own life might be in danger?" Hannibal asked, straightening the part of one of the paper stacks that was closest to him.

"Yes of course. You can't come into an office every day where your co-workers are dropping like flies and not be concerned."

"And there are fourteen other scientists with labs in this wing."

"Yes, that's right. And most of them have lab assistants or students coming and going. There's probably thirty or forty of us here on any given day including all the support staff."

"What are you working on at the moment?" Hannibal asked him.

"We have security clearances," Dr. Katz added when she saw the researcher hesitate. "And our only interest is in whether there might be some motivation for the murders there."

"Well, my specialty as you know is in the interactions between human digestive enzymes and certain peptide chains. The short answer is that I have been trying to isolate specific combinations of digestive biochemical reactions that can reverse cellular degeneration."

"And what is DoD's interest in that?" Dr. Katz asked leaning forward.

"I don't know, specifically," he replied. "I was just happy to get the funding. Potentially there are some broad reaching implications for anti-aging treatments, cancer therapies or faster recovery from exposure to radiation… I imagine that's the kind of thing they want to use it for."

"That certainly sounds valuable. So perhaps someone is interesting in stealing your work?"

"I'm afraid they'd be pretty disappointed if they did," he replied. "I've run a few series of tests, but haven't written up any of the results yet and nothing that I've seen so far has exactly set the world on fire. If I had cured cancer or aging I'm sure you would have heard about it."

"Have you had any recent changes in staff? Disgruntled former assistants possibly?"

"No, nothing like that. I prefer to work on my own and don't have any assistants. The cleaning crew take care of the mice and, as I said I don't have much interaction with them."

“Well,” Dr. Katz concluded, looking at Hannibal to confirm he had no further questions. “Thank you for your time, which we won’t take up any more of. Good luck with your research and we hope to read more about it soon.”

“Do take good care of yourself, Dr. Bevier. And don’t hesitate to give us a call if you notice or remember anything out of the ordinary.”

“I certainly will,” he replied giving them another clammy handshake goodbye before shutting the door with a clang.

Chapter End Notes

Again, blame Dr Wikipedia.

# Exhumation

The next two months passed largely in a blur for Hannibal. As much as he wanted to trap every moment in his mind palace, he found that getting only a few hours of sleep a night made it more difficult to really take in every detail of the experiences he wanted to capture.

For example, one day Dr Bloom called him to the Institute because Randall was spotting. It turned out to be nothing but Hannibal suggested they hook him up to the ultrasound machine to be sure and he was able to hear his cub's heartbeat for the first time.

For a moment, he couldn't tell if the rushing sound of blood was coming from the monitor or from inside his own head. He hadn't even realised how concerned he had been at the seeming lack of obvious developments. Randall had a little morning sickness, but nothing worrisome and was getting a very faint bulge but not so that anyone who didn't routinely see him naked would notice. Now, at last, there was some solid evidence.

Dr Bloom pointed out the cub on the monitor, unhelpfully noting it was about the size of a plum which put Randall off fruit for days. Hannibal had gotten him back up to an average weight for his height, though, and had him on vitamins so it wasn't a significant setback.

Dr Bloom called Will out of his class to come and see it as well. Hannibal hadn't broken the news to him yet because he wanted to wait past the first trimester to be sure. But since Will had been in the same class with Randall when he got sick, and Hannibal didn't want to worry him, he decided that was as good a time as any.

Will stood absolutely stunned at the news he was going to be an uncle but then smiled and congratulated both of them tracing the outline of the cub on the screen with wonder. The spine, ribs and leg bones were all clearly visible. Even Randall seemed to believe it was actually happening for the first time.

Hannibal's talk with Will seemed to have worked and, while he would still push boundaries and couldn't help sticking his nose into everything, he was no longer plotting to run away or being openly defiant when Hannibal tried to train them.

He hadn't made as much progress as he wanted to though because Jack was calling him almost every day, sometimes every few hours, wanting an update on their endless interviews of staff with access to the nutritional science lab and trying to get his views on the latest Ripper murders.

And then a few weeks before Christmas, Jack called to tell him that Dr. Bevier had become the sixth victim, this time killed in his office by an intruder only an hour before.

Hannibal dropped his omegas off at the Institute and then drove to meet Jack at the latest crime scene. They were joined by half a dozen DoD investigators and the lab manager wearing Hazmat suits. Jack assured him as they suited up that it was just a precaution.

The lab manager replayed the security tapes for them. A man wearing a baseball cap had gotten as far as Dr Bevier's wing using the severed fingers of a student who had called in sick that morning. Then he waited until Dr Bevier went to get some coffee, held a shotgun to his head as he reopened his office door. In the office, he tried to get Dr Bevier to open one of the refrigerator units but Dr Bevier had deliberately used the wrong finger setting off the alarm system. The intruder shot Dr Bevier in the back of the head, shattered the lab window with a series of shots and then jumped from the ledge to a nearby tree.

"Whatever he was after," Jack said. "Thank God he doesn't seem to have gotten it."

"He seems to know the security arrangements," Hannibal noted. "And you can see in every camera shot he has his face turned away."

"So we're back to any of the forty people with access to the lab."

A sudden gust of wind through the open window sent the stacks of loose paper on Dr Bevier's desk flying in every direction.

"Someone put some plastic sheeting up to secure that window," Jack barked. "Before the entire crime scene blows away."

As Hannibal knelt to pick some of the papers up, he paused and then rose with a sheet in his hand.

"This is curious," he told the director. "Dr Bevier said he didn't have a lab assistant."

"He didn't," Dr Thompson replied.

"Then why was he paying… Garret Jacob Hobbs five thousand dollars a month?" Hannibal held up the invoice for the other to see.

"He's one of our suppliers," the lab manager explained looking a little puzzled. "He's a ranger for the Park Service and whenever they do deer culls, sometimes he sells us some of the carcasses. Otherwise they would go to waste. It's all completely humane and above board."

"Has Garret Jacob Hobbs ever come to the lab itself?" Jack asked taking a closer look at the invoice and then handing it back to Hannibal.

"Yes, he makes deliveries maybe once or twice a month."

"Then why didn't Dr. Bevier put him on the interview list?" Jack asked flipping through the file to double check.

"There's no address on this invoice. Just a cell phone number," Hannibal noted.

"He recently separated from his wife and has been living in one of the Park Service cabins while they work through some issues. He asked us to just pay him in person when he makes deliveries."

“Do you have his old address somewhere?” Jack asked leaning in and checking that he still had his gun.

“Yes, I can pull a copy of one of the older invoices on the computer in my office if you’ll come this way.”

“You don’t need to be here for this part, Dr Lecter,” Jack told him as they were getting into their cars and leaving.

“I don’t mind,” Hannibal told him. “This is very instructive. And wouldn’t it be better for you to have some backup. At least until the police arrive?”

“Alright, but make sure you stay well back and in the car. If anything happens, just call 911 again and tell them to hurry up.”

Hannibal followed Jack on the brief drive to the home of Garret Jacob Hobb’s wife. It was only about a five minute trip but he had time for a quick phone call when he was stopped at the sole red light.

He parked behind Jack and stayed in the car as instructed until he saw the director racing towards the house with his gun pulled. Looking over, Hannibal could see a middle-aged beta woman had stumbled out onto the porch with blood gushing down the side of her dress.

About thirty seconds later, he heard a series of gunshots. Stepping out of his car at last, he could see Jack on the porch waving him over, his hands covered in blood up to the elbows.

In the kitchen, Hannibal found a young girl with a slash around half her neck bleeding freely onto the tile and the fresh corpse of Garrett Jacob Hobbs in the corner. He lifted the girl’s head up and put pressure on the wound to try to slow the bleeding while Jack called for the paramedics.

Her head dropped into his lap like dead weight and she seemed to be smiling up at him.

# Accommodation

“What’s the party for?” Will asked as Hannibal showed him how to peel celeriac. The Alpha was also trying to keep a close eye on Randall who was slicing carrots but didn’t always have the patience required to make the cuts even sizes.

“There’s a lot of good news to celebrate,” Hannibal told them coming around the counter to start boiling pigs’ feet for the kholodets. “It’s almost Christmas. One of my colleagues, Agent Crawford, got a commendation for saving that girl I told you about. And when I went to visit her in the hospital yesterday, she seemed very sad about losing her family just before the holidays. So I think it would be nice for Abigail to get out of the hospital and have a real meal instead.”

“Then why can’t we come to it?” Randall asked pushing his chair back slightly to look over a very unsatisfactory stack of julienned carrots.

“Because I haven’t had enough time to train you two to attend full length dinner parties. For example, if these carrots are all cut different sizes they won’t cook evenly. Do it again, please,” Hannibal told him handing him some more peeled vegetables from Will’s pile. “And if they aren’t even, you’re going to sit here all night grouping them in order of size for me.”

Randall rolled his eyes but complied. Hannibal was also planning to work on general comportment at some stage but was still choosing his battles.

“If you behave yourselves, and stay up in your room playing quietly, you can come down for the coffee and desserts,” he added. “I haven’t told anyone at work about the cub yet and wanted to make an announcement. It will have a better effect coming at the end of the meal.”

“Who’s coming?” Will asked with the slightest hint of apprehension. Hannibal had found he was a little shy around new people. Now that the FBI case was solved, he was hoping to have more time for training and to improve his pups’ socialisation.

“Agent Crawford, his wife, some of my other colleagues at the FBI, Dr Bloom, Dr DuMaurier and Abigail.”

Hannibal noticed that Randall had picked up one of the octopus tentacles and was making faces and waving it threateningly at his brother who was starting to giggle and peel celeriac skin onto the floor instead of the counter.

“You’re answering your own question now, pup,” Hannibal told him, gently retrieving the tentacle and then pointing his omega back to the carrots.

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After two solid days of cooking, Hannibal was ready to greet his guests. He’d brought the pups swimming with him and then to the omega store earlier in the day to try to wear them out and find some activities to keep them occupied. He’d found that the only way to keep the

omegas absorbed in anything for more than a few minutes was to let them pick out what they were interested in.

After feeding them their dinner, he took them up their room, gave Randall his erector set and Will a stack of junior mystery novels and then ordered them to stay there until he came to retrieve them.

Dr Bloom arrived a little early, ostensibly to help him prepare, but ultimately to sip home-brewed beer and complain about Dr Chilton. She asked after the pups and went up to visit with them for a little while as Hannibal was greeting his other guests.

Dr Katz and her two colleagues, Zeller and Price, carpooled together from the office. Hannibal heard them even before he opened the door arguing about the most advantageous birth order.

Dr DuMaurier was fashionably late, blaming the red tape involved in checking Abigail out of the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility even though she had a permission letter from Hannibal. He had been named her temporary guardian until a suitable permanent foster family could be located.

Abigail was subdued but more relaxed than she had been at the hospital. She had one of Dr DuMaurier's scarves wrapped around the bandages on her neck and mostly walked around the periphery of each room looking at the art work.

Jack and Bella were about half an hour late, leading off with earnest apologies particularly from Bella. Her expression conveyed regrets not just for their lateness but for Jack's obvious terrible mood.

"I just spend three hours on the phone with DoD," he ranted as Hannibal passed him a cocktail. "Three months I spent trying to get them to upgrade our security clearances to get you and Dr Katz access to the lab for those interviews and then the idiots in their investigations unit let Freddie Lounds tramp all over the crime scene… I mean look at this!"

Jack set down his drink and drew a laptop out of his bag. Pulling up the Tattlecrime webpage, Hannibal could see photos of the chaos in Dr Bevier's office under a headline of "EXPERIMENT GONE WRONG!"

"I keep telling you that woman is a menace to society," Dr Katz said coming up behind them.

Jack shut the laptop quickly as he saw Abigail coming back into the room.

"Miss Hobbs," he said, burying his earlier annoyance for her benefit. "I'm glad to see you up and about and starting to get some colour in your cheeks again."

"Yes," she replied. "It will be good to finally get out of the hospital and start moving on."

"There's no rush," Bella told her. "You should take some time to decide what you want to do next. Otherwise, you might find you regret something."

"I just want to make a decision about something... to remember what it feels like."

“Well,” Hannibal replied leading her to the table. “Let’s start with appetizers… jamón Ibérico or foie gras timbits?”

They took their seats around the table except for Bella who sat at Jack’s knees with practiced grace. Hannibal was looking forward so much to the time when he could show off his omegas in the same way.

He served them fine slices of smoked ham while they picked enthusiastically from the wide range of platters scattered between the Ostrich egg and Madonna lily centre pieces.

Price and Zeller chattered away happily completing each others’ sentences. Alana and Bedelia made it their mission to ensure Abigail was comfortable and entertained. Hannibal led a series of toasts in Jack’s honour and to Abigail’s health. He was pleased to see that everyone was enjoying themselves, drinking and chatting freely and stopping frequently to complement each dish.

After everyone had finished the hors d’oeuvres, Hannibal brought out the crown roast, carved and distributed it. Hannibal had gone slightly overboard in his efforts to restock his freezer and, finding there was almost no room to store the latest victuals, had decided to throw the party to use up the spares.

Abigail got a bit teary when she saw the roast but explained to Alana that she was just feeling a little homesick but was very grateful to everyone for making the effort to cheer her up.

“There’s nothing to apologise for,” Alana told her while passing her her plate. “Nobody expects you to stop grieving at the drop of a hat. And whatever happened, they were still your family.”

And at least some basic sensitivity for her feelings led Jack to redirect the conversation whenever Price or Zeller made a reference to the Ripper case.

All the plates were cleaned and Hannibal was about to excuse himself to bring his omegas down and introduce them to everyone when all of their phones began buzzing at the same time.

Looking at their screens, they could each see a text message that read:

“Emergency Alert: If you live in the Baltimore Metropolitan or Baltimore County area, you are now under quarantine. Please stay in your house and wait for further instructions. This is not a test.”

# Infection

“Where’s your television?” Jack demanded as soon as he’d read the text.

Hannibal led them into the sitting room and they all filed into the room behind him.

When he turned on the television, an emergency message, matching the text message, was on one side of the screen while a group of tense looking news anchors spoke on the other.

“We’re just getting some breaking news now that the President has deployed the National Guard to enforce a quarantine order for the City and County of Baltimore, Maryland. Residents are instructed to remain in whatever building they are currently in or to seek the nearest unoccupied shelter and remain there. Curfews are being strictly enforced. Do not leave your building for any reason.

“All flights in and out of BWI Marshall Airport have been cancelled as have all Amtrack stops and bus services in the region. If you travelled to the Baltimore area earlier today or yesterday and have since moved on, please avoid further unnecessary human contact, isolate yourself and call the number on the screen beside us.”

“This is in response to an outbreak of a flu-like illness. The Centre for Disease Control advises that the symptoms include sudden, very high fever combined with confusion, skin lesions and insatiable hunger. A number of patients were admitted to local hospitals earlier today. The CDC confirmed that there had been deaths but have not given us any numbers yet.”

“If you are in an area affected by the quarantine, you are advised to remain calm, stay in your building. Keep phone lines free from any unnecessary calls. If you or anyone around you begins to exhibit any symptoms, isolate them and call the number on the screen below me. FEMA recommends gathering a few days emergency supplies and preparing yourself and your loved ones for a possible evacuation. We will keep you updated if this becomes necessary.”

Looking up, Hannibal could see that Jack was already pacing with a phone glued to one ear. Katz, Zeller and Price were furiously googling. The others were looking around in shock and disbelief.

“My brother just posted on Facebook that an armored convoy is driving past his house,” Price announced. “What the hell is going on?”

“Well, I’m a bit busy here too,” they could hear Jack beginning to shout in the background.

“Jack,” Katz said pulling on his jacket sleeve to get his attention. “The Director of the FBI just posted his orders. We’re supposed to comply with the quarantine unless we get specific instructions to report to FEMA to assist.”

She held up her phone so that Jack could see the email. He quickly hung up his own phone to check if he had the same one.

“So we’re supposed to just sit here doing nothing...” he fumed.

Hannibal noticed that the three nervous anchors on the television had been replaced by a single nervous Homeland Security official in a different location.

“... don’t forget to pack any medications required by your family. You will not be allowed to bring pets to the shelter. They are not at any risk of infection. Leave them somewhere secure with a few days’ worth of food and water. Vėlgi piliečiai išlieka ramūs ir dėl savo priežasčių nepalikite namo...”

“Hannibal,” he heard Bedelia saying and felt her taking his hand. Her skin felt as cold as ice. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, of course,” he replied swallowing and smiling at the same time. “I’m sorry, how rude of me.”

He spoke a little louder to get all of their attention. “It appears I will have the pleasure of your company for a little longer at least. I was just about to serve some espresso and sanguinaccio dolce but perhaps under the circumstances, we should take it in here instead of the dining room.”

When there was no response, he went into the kitchen to arrange a tray of coffees and desserts. Alana followed him out and offered to serve the rest of the party if he wanted to check on his omegas or bring them down.

“Yes, thank you Dr Bloom. That would be very kind of you.”

He washed his hands with antibacterial soap and then took the last two desserts and brought them upstairs feeling like he was passing through a veil on the stairs from one world into a completely different one. He tried to count how many people they had been exposed to earlier in the day. The pool and the store hadn’t been crowded but who knew how many people had been there before them or how often the surfaces were cleaned.

As soon as he came through the door, the two omegas stood up beaming at him and asked if it was time to come down now. He smiled to see that they had made the effort to keep their clothes and hair neat.

“I’m sorry pups, but not tonight. I think Abigail has had enough excitement and I don’t want to steal Jack’s thunder.”

Randall looked only passingly disappointed to miss the party and Will not at all.

“Some of my guests are going to stay the night because the weatherman is predicting black ice. I want you to gather up your things and come with me. You can both stay in my room tonight and then maybe you can meet some of them at breakfast tomorrow instead.”

Randall started grumbling about having to share their room and Will wanted to know how there could be ice if it hadn't rained that day and was trying to look out the slats in the shutters to see.

"Pick up your things and bring them now, pups, or you can both spend the night locked in the attic with sore backsides and no dessert instead."

That got them moving. Once they had shifted their personal items to Hannibal's bedroom he gave them the puddings to eat next to the fireplace and then told them to brush their teeth and go to bed when they were finished. He felt both of their foreheads and was relieved to find there was no hint of a fever. They both still looked bright eyed and alert.

He locked the door to his bedroom before going back downstairs.

Back in the sitting room, everyone was still glued to the television and seemed hardly to have noticed either his absence or return.

Finally Abigail looked up at him and said, "They keep telling us to put together some supplies in case we have to evacuate quickly. Like some bug out bags."

Jack seemed to come alive at the promise of a mission. "And water, just in case the supply is disrupted for some reason. Anything that can be filled with water, we should."

"Of course," Hannibal told them. He showed them where he kept his monogrammed leather suitcases, flashlights and batteries and then led them into the pantry.

"Don't you have anything in cans besides salted capers and coconut milk?" Abigail asked him.

Hannibal factored her age and recent trauma into his response. "I'm afraid not. But I do preserve my own artichoke hearts, roasted bell peppers and tomatoes in jars instead. The flavour is less likely to be tainted by the glass."

Abigail shrugged and found some dish towels to wrap the jars in so they wouldn't rattle together when packed.

Meanwhile Jack directed Katz, Price and Zeller to fill all of the pots, pans, bowls and bathtubs with water.

They loaded up the trunk of the Bentley and then Jack's car with supplies. Hannibal noticed Jack take his shotgun and ammo out of the trunk and instruct Beverly to bring her car around and do the same with hers.

Standing out on the street briefly he noticed the long line of flickering lights from his neighbours' television sets and the eerie lack of traffic noises.

"You know I abhor violence," he told Jack. "Is it really necessary to bring guns into my house?"

“We don’t really know what’s happening here,” Jack told him. “Until we do, we need to take every precaution.”

Once everything was packed, there was nothing to do except watch the television play the same messages over and over again and text family members who seemed to know as little about what was going on as they did.

Bedelia asked if there was somewhere she could wash her face and lie down for a few minutes.

Hannibal explained that he had five guest bedrooms upstairs which they could split up as they chose. Price and Zeller agreed to share with an unconvincing show of reluctance, Jack and Bella were obviously together, Abigail chose to share with Alana and then Bedelia and Katz each got their own room.

Hannibal, with Abigail’s assistance, made sure that they all had fresh towels and toiletries in their bathrooms.

He went briefly back into his own bedroom to find suitable sleeping garments for his guests who, of course, had nothing packed. He could see that his pups were sound asleep and did not seem disturbed at all.

Fortunately, he had enough sets of pyjamas to go around.

Jack suggested that they take shifts with at least one person staying up to monitor any important news on the television and then agreeing to wake the others up if there were any developments they needed to know about. Jack volunteered for the first two-hour shift, then Hannibal, Katz and Price.

When they had all retired to their rooms, Hannibal lay in bed stroking his omegas’ hair and playing through various scenarios in his head. They would be better off staying here instead of evacuating. He had plenty of supplies, even after what he’d given the others, and couldn’t risk Randall’s agoraphobia being triggered by some kind of shelter situation.

He would be happy to see the others go if there was an order. More people meant more risk of infection and he had never intended for all of them to be staying in his house for any extended period of time.

There was more security in numbers, but it depended on who those numbers were and whether or not you could trust them. It only took a few rotten apples. But then there could be a cure for the infection any day and he would have to live with the consequences of any actions he took. So he wouldn’t force them to go, but would suggest they did and politely refuse if they insisted he join them.

It felt like only a few minutes had passed when he heard Jack gently knocking on the door to tell him that there had been no major developments and that it was now his shift.

Hannibal waited until he could hear Jack snoring and then gently lifted Randall out of bed. He woke slightly in the wine cellar when Hannibal leaned down to open the trap and

mumbled, “Where are we going?”

“Shh, pup,” Hannibal told him. “Downstairs.”

# Seclusion

Hannibal carried his drowsy omega down the stairs, along the corridor and into the spare bedroom in the basement. Randall woke up a little from the lights and was scenting him with his eyes closed.

The Alpha had been intending to have a serious talk with his mate but as soon as he put him on the bed, Randall rolled over onto his stomach and started pulling his legs up under himself. Hannibal felt himself stiffening despite his original resolve. Perhaps the discussion would go better if he spent some time reassuring the pup of his affections first. And he wasn't sure the next time they would have this opportunity.

He put his hands flat on the omega's haunches, hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and rolled his palms around until the pants slid down revealing his cleft. All of the hormones surging through the omega made him slick up if Hannibal even laid a finger on him. It seemed like an illogical reaction, since the deed was already done, but Bedelia had explained that it was an instinctive enticement and bonding technique that bred omegas used to keep their Alphas devoted to them during their most vulnerable period.

Hannibal pulled Randall's shirt up and over his head until it only bound his wrists together loosely and then pulled off his own pyjama bottoms. He climbed over his omega who was already making happy, sleepy little moans for him. Hannibal mouthed at and then gently bit down on his mating mark which woke the pup up a little more.

Randall lifted his backside to wriggle it up against his Alpha's cock and then chased the contact with his back along Hannibal's stomach and chest.

"Do you want something, Randall?" Hannibal teased him. "You know you need to ask first."

The omega gave something halfway between a moan and groan and then said, "Please can I have your cock, Alpha?"

Hannibal tested him with a few fingers and found he was nearly ready. He gave the omega's pseudocock a few smooth strokes to move things along.

"You can, pup, but we don't have much time. I'm going to have to make it quick."

With the omega's head half turned to him, he could see a mischievous smile spreading on his face and then felt him give another squirm under him.

Hannibal shifted the pup's hips to the angle and position he wanted, lined himself up and settled himself in. He met almost no resistance for the first few thrusts but then, as he was starting to set up a rhythm, Randall started to clamber and buck a little under him to try to provoke the Alpha into pinning him.

Hannibal took a handful of the omega's hair, which was finally the right length, and used it to hold his head carefully but firmly against the mattress. Then he gave him a slightly harder

bite on his mating mark paired with some more emphatic thrusting.

“Be a good boy and hold still for me,” Hannibal told him. “You know better than to think you’re in charge here.”

Randall gave a satisfied little growl and complied while Hannibal took him vigorously. As his knot began to swell, he could see that the omega seemed to be concentrating hard on something instead of giving his usual huffing groans and quiet wails.

“Do you need some help not coming?”

The pup furiously shook his head no but then a second later was shaking his head yes. Hannibal reached his hand around to restrain him.

“You’re being such a good pup for me. Don’t forget to breathe.” Randall let his breath out in a great heave which made it easy for Hannibal to lodge his knot. The omega started panting as Hannibal took his last few ruts to tip himself over the edge. He let the pup go a second later and was rewarded with a rush of sensation that spread from his cock down and around and up into every nerve ending.

Rolling on to their sides, he could feel the omega trying to snuggle back closer into him. Hannibal wrapped his arms around him and brought a leg over to enclose him better.

“You trust me, don’t you pup?”

Randall nodded and gave him a blissed out hum.

“You know I would never do anything to hurt you or my cub.”

“Yes, why?” The omega clearly just wanted to go back to sleep and seemed a little miffed to have to answer obvious questions. Hannibal’s heart gave a little leap at how devoted his pup was after such a short time.

“I need you to stay down here in the basement for a little while. It’s not a punishment, you didn’t do anything bad. But I think it’s safer for you and for the cub.”

“Because of the ice and the other Alphas?” Randall was starting to sound confused.

“No, there’s a flu going around and I don’t want you to get sick. It’s better if you aren’t exposed to anyone who might have it.”

“Can Will come to?”

“Yes, I’m going to go get him as soon as my knot goes down. But he might be a little scared to stay down here so I need you to help keep him calm, OK? It’s not my first choice to keep you two here but I think it’s the best way to keep you both safe.”

“How long do we have to stay here?”

“Probably just a few days. Until the others leave and the risk of getting sick has gone down. But I can bring you food and keep you company as much as I can and you two can have any books or games you want and if you need me any time all you need to do is send me a message, OK?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“That’s my brave boy,” Hannibal told him giving him a kiss to the back of the head. Giving a little test, he found that his knot had gone down enough to pull out without causing the omega discomfort. He went in the bathroom to wash himself off and put his pyjamas back on. When he got back, he found that Randall was already fast asleep. He lifted him under the covers, replaced the duvet with a fresh one from the storage room next door, and then went upstairs to retrieve Will.

The younger omega hadn’t woken and remained asleep in his arms as he carried him downstairs. He sat in one of the armchairs with Will in his lap and gently woke him up.

Will gave a start when he realised where he was and then began some soft distress whining until Hannibal reassured him and pointed out that Randall was there too. He explained the risk to the older omega and the cub which Will seemed to reluctantly accept.

“I know you don’t like it down here,” Hannibal told him. “But I need you to be a big pup and help take care of your brother now. He needs to stay here and he’ll be a lot more comfortable if he has you for company. I promise it won’t be for very long and then you can both come back up into the house with me.”

He could see that the omega had gone chalk white but was trying to put on a brave face for him. Hannibal lifted him up and put him in bed next to his brother giving him a kiss on the temple while tucking him in.

As he was moving to leave, Will leaned up to give him a tentative but genuine hug around the neck and said, “Please don’t worry. We’ll be OK.”

Hannibal froze for a second annoyed with himself that he’d let his concern be so obvious and potentially upset the omegas. But then he relaxed a little, returned the hug, resettled the pup and went back upstairs to better compose himself.

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Hannibal woke Katz up for her shift and then retired to his bed. He was trying to think through more scenarios and options but the smell of the omegas lingering on his sheets and pillows distracted him. Turning on the surveillance footage he could see that they were still in bed but were awake and making that soothing trilling noise at each other again.

Switching the camera, he could see that Katz was snooping around in the downstairs medicine cabinet. There was nothing that she would be able to find but the sooner he could have the house back to just him and his omegas the better.

Three or four hours of fitful sleep later, Hannibal stumbled down to the kitchen to start breakfast only to find Price had begun making cappuccinos and was oversteaming the milk. The beta actually started arguing when Hannibal tried to show him how to do it correctly.

Writing off his morning coffee, Hannibal focused on making a large pastry ring with cherry preserves, mini quiches, and pomegranate breakfast cocktails. He set these out in the sitting room, assuming that the others would want to watch the news while they ate.

Jack made a beeline for the television as soon as he came down, grabbing a coffee and ignoring the food.

The news was still being read by a series of increasingly exhausted looking Homeland Security officials. The quarantine had been extended to the DC metro area. All the schools were closed and flights cancelled. There were unconfirmed reports that the flu had spread to other cities which were also considering a quarantine but the official would not say which ones.

FEMA was going to be distributing food packages house to house that afternoon instead of trying to evacuate everyone. They were instructed to put a note on their door saying how many people were living there, what their names and Social Security numbers were, whether they had any dietary restrictions and some proof (a photo and all of their signatures) so that they would know how many boxes to leave. They were also supposed to hang a white towel or shirt out the window if anyone was showing symptoms. They were not to leave the house or to try to approach the distribution workers. FEMA would announce when they could open the door to bring the food in.

As the others were absorbed with watching the news and texting with their friends and families, Hannibal gathered together a bag of food and other supplies to bring down to the omegas. He had checked a few times and could see that they were remaining relatively calm, had woken up, taken a bath and were reading together. Randall had texted him that they were a little hungry and could they please have their breakfast.

Hannibal added some more books for Will and was about to sneak into the wine cellar to bring the bag down when Bedelia cornered him in the study.

“I just wanted to thank you again for your hospitality,” she told him. “I know you’re a very private person and it can’t be easy for you having so many unintended guests in your home, especially other Alphas.”

“That’s very kind of you,” he replied. “But, of course, the circumstances can’t be helped and I’m happy to assist in any way I can.”

“I hope you don’t mind my observing that you seem somewhat more abstracted than usual.”

“I suppose I’m increasingly a creature of habit and find the disruption to my routine somewhat... unsettling. But I assure you that your company and the company of the others is not a contributing factor.”

“Would it be helpful for you if we discussed the contributing factors?”

“Perhaps another time. I think it would be best for all of us to keep our minds in the present if we can.”

“How are your omegas doing? I imagine this is very stressful for them as well.”

“I am minimising their stress by limiting their exposure to it. I hope you’ll agree that’s for the best.”

“As long as you’re sure that it’s their stress you are trying to minimise.”

“Yes, of course, Dr. DuMaurier. I assure you that I am well practiced in controlling myself and that the best interests of my omegas is at the forefront of my mind.”

“As your friend, it’s not your control that concerns me. It’s the cost of that control. But I just wanted to let you know that I’m here if you ever want to discuss anything.”

“That’s very kind of you. I will keep it in mind.” With that, Hannibal lifted the bag and headed for the basement.

# Position

They wrote up their list of names, social security numbers and dietary requirements to put out on the front door for FEMA. Price insisted on a big cheesy group photo under the horns on the dining room mantle then made a second copy to post on the refrigerator door.

As Hannibal opened the front door to put the note out he saw almost every one of the neighbours had hung out a white towel or shirt. Only a handful of them had put out notes.

Closing and locking the door, he went out into the back garden and stood listening. He could still hear a few televisions in the distance but nothing else. There was no movement that he could see in any of his neighbours' windows.

Inside, Jack was pacing like a caged bull and checking his phone every five minutes for his orders. Hour after hour nothing came.

A little after one o'clock they heard engine noises in the street and lined up to peek out the front windows to watch a convey of army trucks making their way down the street. They were guarded by armed soldiers on foot wearing gas masks.

There were teams of workers in full hazmat suits running to each door, taking the notes where they found them, noting on iPads which houses had white towels out and how many people were reporting they needed food or other supplies. Then they would signal to a second group of workers who pulled the specified number of boxes, bags of toilet paper and bottles of water off the trucks and ran them up to each porch.

"They're not fucking around," Zeller observed.

It took five of them to argue Jack out of going outside to offer help. Katz was only able to convince him by arguing that he might miss his actual orders if he got too far from his car.

They were under strict instructions not to open the door until the driver read out the last digit of their house number. He waited until the convey had moved completely on to the next street but left guards on each end to make sure everyone went directly back into their houses. Hannibal's house number ended in a nine so they were the last ones to go.

When the number was called, they all ran together to move the boxes and bottles in as quickly as they could. Hannibal noted that the half the boxes were still sitting on their respective porches.

They'd been given three boxes with thirty-six "meals" in each, three bags of toilet paper and three ten-gallon bottles of water. Mostly the boxes were filled with canned chicken and tuna, raisins and branded snack foods like tortilla chips, crackers and chocolate chip cookies but there was a surprising amount of fresh fruits and vegetables which FEMA must have grabbed from the grocery stores or distribution centres assuming it was just going to rot otherwise with the quarantine in place.

Abigail arranged everything neatly in the pantry swapping out the items that were more practical for travel with the ones they had loaded in the cars on the first night.

She breathed a faint sigh of relief once she had everything organised but then the distant sound of gunshots sent them all scrambling upstairs to see if they could catch a glimpse of anything from the windows. Whatever was happening was too far away for them to see and there was no mention of anything on the news except for more airports, schools and other facilities closing and the same instructions to stay inside repeated over and over again.

Hannibal made them another crown roast for dinner, preferring to use up the perishables first in case they lost electricity. He had solar panels so that his energy consumption for his freezers would not draw attention from the power company but wasn't 100% sure that they would provide enough power for the whole house if they needed to rely on them completely especially in the dead of winter.

And if he did end up having to show the others the basement for some reason, it would be better to have used up anything potentially recognisable first.

This time Bella and Alana helped him prepare gratinéed potatoes, onion soup and a spinach salad.

The meal was a little more subdued than the night before. Abigail noted that she was glad if she had to be stuck in a house under quarantine that it was with such amazing chefs although she added not, perhaps, with so many psychiatrists.

Zeller, Price and Katz launched into their desert island favorites but were interrupted by what sounded like an explosion coming from the direction of the port. Again, there was nothing they could see from the windows and nothing on the news except amplified warnings reminding them that looting was a crime and would not be tolerated.

While the others were distracted watching the news, Hannibal boxed up some of the food and brought it down to the omegas. They perked up as soon as he entered but he noticed they were both looking a little haggard, especially Will. Randall mentioned that he hadn't been able to get any sleep because his brother kept tossing and turning.

After he fed them, they started begging him to let them go back upstairs even for a little while because they were dying of boredom.

To burn off some pent-up energy, Hannibal decided to let them help reorganise the storage rooms to see if they could find anything useful. His uncle had left crates and crates of things behind when he had moved back to Paris after Lady Murasaki's death and Hannibal had barely touched any of it in the fifteen years since.

He pulled the canvas cover off an 1820s Sienna velvet sofa with enormous rolled arms. It had once belonged to his mother's family and sat in their music room in Druskininkai.

He sat in the centre of the sofa directing the omegas to bring him different things so he could tell them which pile to move them to. He had them pile anything vaguely useful to bring upstairs in the corridor, anything he didn't want to throw away but didn't have any immediate

use for into a corner of the same storage room and anything he was happy to throw away in a pile near the door to the ramp that led up into the garage.

They made slow progress because the pups kept wanting to curl up next to him and look at things instead of rummaging around in dusty boxes. Hannibal didn't mind, however, since the point was just to keep them happy and occupied.

They were very excited about the katanas and armour¬ which Hannibal had them pile carefully in the corridor. There were a lot of clothes but not many that he would consider seriously offering his guests if the quarantine dragged on. The handful of items that weren't absurdly old fashioned or moth eaten went out in the corridor and most of the rest that didn't have any specific sentimental value went to the ramp.

Will carried over a heavy box full of things from Hannibal's boarding school days.

"Is this from your school?" He asked holding up a class photo and grinning. Randall jumped over to have a look almost tripping over another box in the process.

"Yes," Hannibal told them.

"Which one is you?"

"Can you guess?"

"The frowny one with bangs in the back?" Hannibal gave him a kiss on the forehead in confirmation. Will handed the photo to his brother and dove into the rest of the box.

"Is this all your homework? It's all in French."

"Haha, your uniform!" Randall exclaimed as Hannibal elbowed him playfully in the side.

"Yes, I went to boarding school in Paris."

"They all say 'TB'," Will announced after flipping through a handful of dusty exam papers and school themes.

"That means 'tres bien' 'very good' – the best."

"This one's just a 'B' though..." Will said climbing onto the sofa next to Hannibal and handing it to him.

"That still means 'good'."

"What's it for?"

"Physics, the instructor was very unreasonable... Randall I think that's enough. If you dig through every single paper we'll be here all night."

"Did you draw these?"

“Yes, Will start putting those back, that box can go in the corner.”

“Is this a castle? It’s better than a photograph.”

“That’s my school.”

“Who’s this?

“My uncle’s omega.”

“She’s very pretty.”

“Yes, put that back in the box now and go get me that other one. That one can go in the corner, thank you Will and then go get that flat box over there.”

Randall carried over another large box and dropped it in front of Hannibal, his face red from the effort as he pulled the flaps open.

“There’s nothing in this one but ropes and... whatever these are,” Randall said holding up spreader bars.

“That box can go out in the corridor,” Hannibal told him briskly.

“But what are they?”

Thankfully Will interrupted with “This one’s just baby clothes.”

“That was Misch... my christening dress. It’s been in my mother’s family for hundreds of years.”

“Did you really wear it when you were a cub?” Will asked holding up all the lacy frills and the improbably small arm holes.

“Yes, but only for one day. Put it back now. It’s a bit fragile and we’re still going to need to get some use out of it.”

When Will had set the last box gently in the corner, Hannibal told them “I think that’s enough for one night. We can look around a bit more tomorrow. I need to get back up to my guests.”

The pups grumbled a little but were genuinely tired now and let him lead them back into the bedroom. He drew them a hot bath because they were covered In dust and told them to brush their teeth and go to bed afterwards. He could see Will was already nodding a little and hoped they would both get a good nights’ sleep.

Upstairs he found the others increasingly panicked as they listened to the sound of cars tires squealing in the streets, more shouting and gunfire, distant explosions. A neighbour’s dog was barking incessantly, then gave a sudden high-pitched yelp and stopped.

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Bella was trying to convince Jack to come to bed for the fourth time when suddenly all of the FBI agents' phones chimed at the same time to indicate a new message. Jack dove across the sofa to grab his phone and check it.

"They want us to report to the naval depot at Fort McHenry as soon as possible to assist FEMA," he announced retrieving his shotgun from the hall closet.

"Don't worry my love, I'll be back before you know it and, in the meantime, this is the safest place you could possibly be." If he had to leave his omega with another Alpha he supposed Hannibal and Bedelia were the least threatening ones he could think of. It was better than having to worry about her waiting alone in their empty house.

Katz, Price and Zeller filed after him to Katz's car. He was probably forgetting something important and had barely slept for two days but the only thing he could think about was getting out of the house and finally having a chance to do something useful and better assess the situation.

It was well after dark and there was a dense fog but they could just see, as they backed out of Hannibal's back drive, that some of the townhouses still had their FEMA packages sitting on the stoops.

Zeller had his window rolled down to try to hear better but Jack ordered him to put it back up. The damp air was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

It was about thirty short blocks to the depot and Jack was gunning it despite the fog, figuring that with the curfew the streets should be empty.

Only about ten blocks away, at the corner of Riverside Park, he had a brief glimpse in the headlights of three people bent over a prone figure in the middle of the road before he plowed into two of them and ran over the figure on the ground.

He came to a screeching halt once the tires made contact with the ground again and then jumped out of the car to see how badly injured the people he had hit were. The others sat stunned in the car. He couldn't see the bodies in the fog but could hear their hideous groaning some distance away. He leaned into the car to flick on his high beams and could just see the third figure he had missed lurching towards him.

She had been a young smartly dressed woman but every vein in her face was black and protruding, her eyes were drained of all color and she had a length of intestine hanging out of the side of her blood drenched mouth. She stumbled to the ground on one of her high heels but kept crawling towards him with a rasping moan not even registering what should have been a very painful fall onto the asphalt.

Without thinking, Jack pulled out his Glock and shot her in the head before she could grab his leg. Black sludge splattered all over the bottom of his pants.

"Jack, get in the fucking car," he could hear Beverly shouting behind him. She leaned over and yanked him into the driver's seat by the back of his belt with all of her strength, bashing his head slightly against the doorframe. Then she leaned over him to pull the door shut.

Suddenly the croaking, wheezing, rasping sounds seemed to be coming from every direction.

“Drive, drive, drive, drive...” Zeller or Price or possibly both were chanting as something smacked into the left side of the trunk behind them hard enough to shake the whole car.

At the edge of his high beams but still shadowy from the fog he could see what looked like a solid wall of figures advancing towards them down the street.

The car was still running, so Jack slammed on the accelerator and turned into the park speeding down the empty footpaths and away, he hoped, from the main mass of whatever it was that was out there.

“Get me another route to the depot,” he shouted at Zeller throwing his phone back at him.

As he turned back around, he slammed into two more figures and then into a tree.

When the airbags deflated they stumbled out of the car and gathered a few feet away. The car horn was blaring loud enough to be heard miles away.

“Jack, we have to go back,” Katz was trying to shout at him through the ringing in his ears.

Zeller was leading the way using the map application on his phone. Looking back, Jack could see that several of the figures were gathering around the car, not seeming to realise that they were no longer in it.

They ran in a loose formation, Katz and Price with the shotguns and Jack with his sidearm drawn. Outside they could hear more screaming, gunfire and that eerie moaning but the fog made it impossible to judge what direction it was coming from.

They passed block after block of tidy brick townhouses with white towels hanging out of almost every window.

Zeller kept them on back streets and mostly away from the streetlights. When they got to Hannibal’s block he led them up the back alley past all the garages. At Hannibal’s back gate, Katz dialled his number desperately on her phone while Price banged on the garage door.

They heard a groaning noise, Zeller shone the flashlight app at one of the figures that was only a foot or so from Price and Katz blew it away with her shotgun. Price clapped his hands over his ears and sunk to his knees.

Jack could hear more groaning now, coming from both directions in the alley, attracted by the sound of the shot.

“Hannibal,” he started roaring repeatedly at the top of his lungs while Zeller swung the light around desperately trying to find the closest one.

They could hear a rattling and clanging of keys against the gate and then it was open and they were through. Jack grabbed Price around the chest and lifted him bodily through the gate and into the garden.

Hannibal had the gate locked and had stepped back before the first figure crashed against it, reaching through the bars towards them. It was an elderly man with a full grey beard and skin lesions all over his forehead. He was quickly joined by several others who pushed him up so hard against the bars, his skin seemed in danger of slipping off his face.

“Will the gate hold?” Jack shouted barely able to hear either himself or the answer.

Hannibal signalled that they should carry out some furniture to barricade the gate just in case. With nine of them they were quickly able to bring out an armoire and several side tables and desks to completely block the gate even if the hinges gave. The rest of the garden wall was brick and more than ten feet high.

“Bullshit, that’s the flu,” Zeller said as they stood panting in the garden and listening for any further sounds.

# Conversion

Abigail watched with frustration while the two Alphas squared off against each other. Hannibal didn't want to let Agent Crawford back in the house because his pants were covered in some kind of black goo that might be infectious. Meanwhile the three other FBI agents wanted to take one of the other cars and go find their families. Agent Crawford shouted at them that they were staying put until they got further orders. Hannibal was annoyed that Agent Crawford was assuming they were going to be let back into his house without bothering to ask. And the whole time the clanging and moaning outside the gates was getting louder and louder.

Finally Bedelia suggested that they hose Agent Crawford off in the garden and keep the FBI agents in the garage for another 24 hours to monitor whether they got sick or not. Abigail, Bella and Alana got busy carrying blankets, pillows and sofa cushions out to the garage for them. Then she went around to all the ground floor windows and made sure all the shutters were closed and locked. Looking out towards the front street all she could see was the fog. She turned all the lights out in the front of the house and got a chef's knife to hide up her sleeve just to be safe.

Her neck was aching by the end of it and Alana checked her stitches, redressed everything and suggested she lie down and get some sleep. She took Agent Katz's room since the FBI agent was sleeping in the garage.

Lying down made her heart race and her thoughts fly all over the place. Literally a week ago she had been in her own bed in a boring commuter suburb pissed off that her mom had grounded her for being fifteen minutes late for her curfew. She still woke up every morning wondering if her mom would be making pancakes or sausage and eggs for breakfast downstairs.

And she couldn't shake the feeling that her dad was somehow responsible for whatever was going on. He had flipped out when he came home one day to find that her mom had changed the locks and gotten a restraining order against him. If her mom had just made a bit more of an effort to understand all the stress he was going through, maybe he wouldn't have tried to do something so desperate.

She had missed her curfew because she was out visiting her dad at his cabin bringing him some soup, fresh fruit and clean clothes. He didn't cook anything but barbecue and didn't have a washing machine at the cabin. If he kept wandering around unshaven in filthy clothes covered in deer blood he was going to lose his job - the only thing keeping him anchored.

The last thing he told her that night was that he was working on a Christmas present for her and that everything was going to work out fine.

Unable to sleep, Abigail went downstairs to watch TV again. She didn't know why she bothered since it was the same old bullshit hour after hour. Now they were replaying a

message from the President who had relocated to an undisclosed location somewhere in the Rocky Mountains but was urging everyone else to stay calm and remain in their homes.

“Easy for you to say,” Abigail told him.

“What’s that?”

Abigail started as she saw Hannibal entering the room. She winced as turning her neck pulled at the stitches. How was it possible that she kept forgetting they were there?

“Are you alright Abigail?” he asked, coming over to have a better look.

“Yes, sorry. I just keep forgetting not to turn my head.”

“Do you want me or Dr Bloom to have another look? I have some painkillers upstairs if it’s bothering you.”

“No, thank you. I’m really fine.”

“You should try to get some sleep,” he said cupping his hands behind her ears. “Whatever happens in the next few days, I have a feeling that sleep will be one of our most precious commodities. I have some Valium as well if you want to try one. I’ve agreed to take the watch for the next few hours and I promise if anything happens I will come and get you.”

She let him lead her back up to the bedroom with his hand on her side suddenly acutely aware that she was wearing his clothes and that the rest of the house was absolutely silent.

“Do you think Agent Crawford will be OK?” she asked to cover the awkwardness.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Hannibal told her. “But in the meantime we can’t be too careful. We don’t know how the infection is spread yet and shouldn’t take unnecessary risks.”

They arrived at the door and Hannibal asked her again if she wanted something to help her sleep. Abigail said no and then he gave her a little kiss on the forehead and told her to sleep well before heading back downstairs.

She didn’t sleep well but time dragged along anyway. Here she was trapped in a house with total strangers, surrounded by zombies, and all she could think about was her dad and whether he was ever going to be buried now. The coroner still hadn’t released his body and she was supposed to be meeting with the funeral director tomorrow to finalise the arrangements.

Instead, the power grid crashed the next day. Hannibal had solar panels but they didn’t generate enough power to meet all the demands of the house. He adjusted the system on his phone to prioritise the refrigerators and hot water heater but it meant that they couldn’t use the TV and do laundry or take showers at the same time, for example, and had to limit how many rooms had the lights on.

Meanwhile, Abigail wandered around the second floor windows looking out for signs of the infected either in the alley or out on the main street. They seemed to have mostly cleared out

from the alley once they stopped making noise there.

With the fog lifted, she could look out into the street. Small groups of them would shamble past every five or ten minutes and Abigail and the others would rush quietly to the windows to try to get a look at them. They all had the same jerking walk that made them looking like puppets being yanked on strings and had the same black veins and skin lesions but for the most part no other obvious injuries.

Just before dinner time Dr Bloom let Agent Crawford and the other FBI agents back into the main house. None of them had so much as the sniffles but they had obviously been getting on each other's nerves all day.

The internet was down along with the power grid so they hadn't been able to check in with their families from the garage. As soon as they were back in the main house, Katz, Price and Zeller lined up at the landline phone and started trying to call their families. None of them could get through. The phone would ring but no one would answer.

Abigail was almost glad for a fleeting moment that she didn't really have anyone left to worry about.

Agent Crawford was trying to call his bosses but got a busy signal for about forty minutes.

Hannibal convinced him to put the phone down for a while and join them for dinner. They had steak and kidney pies served with a salad of beetroot slices and goat cheese. Abigail felt a bit angry that Hannibal had obviously spent a long time preparing one of the best meals she had ever eaten in her life and all the FBI agents wanted to do was argue about whether they should try to evacuate or not.

They decided to wait one more night and then try to get through to Quantico once there was daylight again. There had been no new news for almost eight hours – just the same unconvincing reassuring messages being played on a looped tape – and no signs of FEMA planning another supply drop. Agent Crawford was determined to better understand the extent to which they were surrounded by the infected and what they could possibly do about it.

Abigail asked if she could go along – anything to get out of the house and be doing something for a little while – but Agent Crawford told her it was too dangerous with her injury. She pointed out that she could shoot and he just said all the more reason to stay behind so that someone could protect Bella. She asked how she was meant to do that when they were taking all the guns but he ignored her.

The accumulated exhaustion of the past three days caught up with her that night and she slept for twelve solid hours without a single dream.

When she finally woke up, the FBI agents were loading themselves into Jack's car this time and promising to either be back soon or to call once they reached Quantico or another safe location.

Bella was obviously distressed but her Alpha wasn't going to be dissuaded so instead she went back up to their room instead of seeing him off. Bedelia went to sit with her.

They were gone less than ten minutes when Abigail heard engine sounds on the road. Peeking out the window she could see an army truck slowly moving down the street but this time the soldiers wearing gas masks were picking up all of the unclaimed boxes off the porches and going into some of the houses to bring out boxes of more supplies.

"Looters," Hannibal told her and she almost screamed with surprise he had snuck up behind her so quietly.

"What do we do if they try to come in?"

"Go upstairs and turn off all the lights," he told her. "And ask Bella, Dr Bloom and Dr DuMaurier to please stay in their rooms. You should all be safe upstairs. I doubt they will try to come into the house when we are surrounded by so many easier targets."

Just as he was finishing they could hear a brief burst of gunfire from one of the neighbouring houses.

"Go on," Hannibal repeated. "Everything will be fine."

Abigail ran upstairs, turned off all the lights and checked that the others were all in their rooms reading. She went to get the kitchen knife she had hidden in her bedroom and then started when she heard their front door being smashed in.

She crept back into the hall and signalled for the other women to go back in their bedrooms.

From the top of the stairs she could hear some harsh whispering between the looters interspersed with muffled coughing.

She hid herself partway in the music room where she had a clear view of the top of the stairs but could not be seen from them. She thought about trying to warn Hannibal who was still downstairs but couldn't think of a way to do it that wouldn't expose both of them.

After a few minutes, she could see the back of one of their heads coming up the stairs. He had taken off his helmet and gas mask and she could see he had dirty blonde, almost ginger hair swept entirely to one side. It didn't look like there was anyone else coming up behind him.

After he had taken a few steps onto the landing, he stopped to bend over and cough again. Abigail stalked up behind him as quietly as she could and shoved the knife into the side of his neck and shoulder. He collapsed with a seizure, kicking one leg against the stair landing rails in a way that Abigail was certain would bring more of them up to investigate.

She tried to pull him into the music room but found that he weighed a lot more than she expected. She was surprised to see that he wasn't much older than her and only a little bit bigger. He had some small sores on his face but didn't seem to have reached the final stage of his infection.

She heard a creak on the stairs and dropped the body, focusing instead on frantically trying to pull the knife back out. It had caught on something, however, and wouldn't pull loose.

Desperate to find another weapon she turned, only to see Hannibal at the top of the stairs with a katana in each hand.

"Well done, Abigail," he told her checking to see that the looter at her feet was definitely dead. He handed her one of the katana and told her to continue guarding the top of the stairs while he dealt with the driver.

She waited, listening as carefully as she could for any sounds of more fighting downstairs but all she could hear was her own heartbeat pounding in her ears.

Finally she could hear the engine on the army truck revving up again and then a beeping sound as it backed closer to the house. She started to creep downstairs with the katana raised, not really sure how to use it but determined to finish things if she had to.

At the bottom of the stairs she could see the rear of the truck backing up to block the stairs into the house.

Then she breathed a sigh of relief when the engine stopped and Hannibal climbed from the cab of the truck into the back and then jumped smoothly onto the porch. Together they carried the four bodies of the looters out into the garden by the back gate. Abigail noted that Hannibal had decapitated all three of his and didn't seem the slightest bit shaken.

Bella, Alana and Bedelia came downstairs and helped them unload all the boxes off the back of the truck and repair the hole in the front door. Mostly the looters had been stealing food, water and batteries but there were also two pistols, a rifle and a few dozen boxes of ammunition.

Hannibal handed the rifle to Abigail and watched as she checked and loaded it. Bella suggested that they wash up and that's when Abigail realised she was still covered in blood. It was still red, instead of the black blood of the infected, but it was obvious from the sores on the looters that they were at least in the early stages of the disease.

She went upstairs to take a shower. She wanted to stand under the hot water for hours but was too worried about missing another attack downstairs. As she was getting dressed again she heard engine sounds in the back alley and raced to see who it was. At the window she could see that it was just Agent Crawford and the other FBI agents returning.

She ran downstairs to meet them in the garage. The FBI agents looked frightened and discouraged. Agent Katz said they had barely made it four blocks before encountering too many of the infected to bulldoze through and had spent the rest of the time trying to double back without leading the infected back to Hannibal's house.

Agent Crawford saw the bodies stacked in the garden and wanted to know about the looters. Hannibal explained that they had been able to ambush them because they thought the house was deserted. Looking down at their bodies, Abigail could see that the one she had killed now seemed to have black veins.

Agent Crawford gave him a little kick to his shoulder and Abigail screamed when the body started trying to turn over and crawl towards her. Hannibal sliced his head off and then the body was still again.

Just to be safe, they made a bonfire to burn the rest of the looters.

“It seems like you have a killer instinct after all,” Agent Crawford told Hannibal once his omega had gone back into the house. “I never would have guessed it.”

“We were just fortunate they were so sick and inexperienced,” Hannibal replied shooting Abigail a look she interpreted as an instruction to keep quiet.

“Well, I couldn’t be gladder for it,” the director told them staring at the remains of the bonfire. “I have the feeling we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

Everyone was very quiet over dinner. The FBI agents seemed to have accepted that there was no viable evacuation route for the moment and no way to contact their families. Agent Crawford spent half the afternoon listening to either busy signals or unanswered rings on the telephone.

After dinner he told Hannibal, “It looks like we’re going to need to impose on your hospitality for a while longer, Dr Lecter. But hopefully more of us here will make it easier to defend this position from whatever’s out there.”

They made plans to watch both sides of the house in shifts and to put sheets up on the roof to signal that they needed to be evacuated. Katz was put in charge of their little armoury and handed out weapons to whoever was on watch.

Abigail looked out the windows one last time before going to bed. She could see groups of the creatures wandering up and down both the main street and the back alley almost continually now. They didn’t seem to pay any particular attention to Hannibal’s house but would turn and shamble after any loud noises.

Shivering, she went back to bed. Dr Bloom insisted on checking for the tenth time that she wasn’t showing any signs of a fever. Whatever the disease was, it didn’t seem to spread just by contact with blood or gore.

Abigail closed her eyes as tightly as she could trying not to see the surprised look on the face of the young looter she had butchered and to shake the feeling that she was as guilty as her father.

# Decompensation

“Please come down,” Randall was texting him at three o’clock in the morning.

Hannibal was supposed to be on watch but he had had to ignore the last two texts from his omegas because Jack was with him constantly trying to better organise their defences and he hadn’t been able to slip away. He shouldn’t really leave his watch post but he was also feeling guilty that he hadn’t been able to bring them their dinner that night and had only been able to arrange very short visits for the last two days.

The Alpha gave one more close check of the street. He could see infected wandering around in the moonlight but they hadn’t shown any particular interest in Hannibal’s house compared with his neighbours and didn’t seem interested in, or capable of, climbing through the truck or over the railings to get to his front doors or windows.

He decided to risk it, grabbed the bag of food he was keeping under a kitchen counter and snuck into the wine cellar. Katz was his watch partner upstairs and on the other side of the house but she tended to wander wherever she wanted or to get bored and come for a chat. He was going to have to keep the visit short again so she didn’t notice his absence.

Once he was through the trap, he took a quick shower in the safety shower in his lab and changed into spare clothes to try to reduce the risk of infection. So far the omegas didn’t seem to have been exposed to anything but it wasn’t worth taking any chances.

His heart dropped though when he went into the bedroom and saw the state that Will was in. His little omega was white as a sheet and drenched in sweat, curled up in one of the armchairs and staring blankly into space. Randall paced fretfully next to him.

Hannibal moved over to feel Will’s forehead and, finding it was clammy instead of feverish, lifted the omega up and sat down again with him in his lap.

“How long has he been like this?” Hannibal asked Randall as Will clutched at his shirt and tried to bury his face in the Alpha’s arm.

“Since lunchtime,” the omega replied, sitting in one of the other chairs. “But he was still talking until about an hour ago. He wants to go back upstairs. He said he can’t sleep in here and he hasn’t slept for five days.”

“Is that true Will?”

The omega nodded into his arm.

“What happens when you try to sleep?”

There was a pause for quite a while before the omega whispered, “I can see the monsters.”

“What monsters are those?”

“The ones upstairs.” Hannibal worked hard not to react.

“What do they look like?”

“I don’t know. They’re just dark shapes. You’re worried about them.”

Hannibal shifted the omega in his arms so he could look him in the eyes. “How do you know that’s true Will?”

“I don’t know. I just know it.”

“He’s always right,” Randall added, starting to look even more anxious himself. “Are there monsters upstairs? Is it the other Alphas?”

Hannibal’s mind raced to find an explanation that would keep the omegas calm and also convince them of the need to stay downstairs for their own safety. On the other hand, he didn’t know how long the epidemic was going to last and it probably wasn’t going to be feasible to keep them in the basement for weeks, especially with Will reacting so badly to it. He seemed to be even more sensitive to isolation than Hannibal had suspected.

“There’s some people who are very sick. And that makes them act like monsters. But they move very slow and can’t come in the house and there are a lot of people upstairs who can protect you so you don’t need to worry about them.”

“So why do we have to stay in the basement?” Randall asked for at least the twentieth time.

“Because I don’t want you to get sick,” Hannibal told him again.

“But we are getting sick,” Will replied. “I can’t sleep in here. Can’t we come up even for a little bit?”

“It’s the middle of the night, pup. There’s nothing for you to do upstairs even if you did come up.”

“Can’t we sleep with you?” Randall begged. “We’ll come straight back down in the morning.”

“I don’t think that’s safe,” Hannibal replied and could feel Will sagging with frustration in his lap. “But once my watch is over, I can come down here again and sleep with you two. If you want we can go in the room next door and you can sleep on the sofa. Maybe you can have the whole basement instead of just this suite so you can get more exercise. There’s a few rooms I need to lock because they’re dangerous but you can play in the storage rooms and in the hall.”

He lifted Will up and put him on his knees next to his leg. He signalled Randall over to kneel on the other side and then brought out their dinner. Will sagged against his leg and barely had the energy to lift his head a little to take the bites that were offered to him.

When they were done, he really needed to get back up for the remainder of his watch. He promised them as he was leaving, however, that he would seriously consider if there was a

way that they could come upstairs for at least part of the day.

Back upstairs, he had about twenty minutes left on his watch. Luckily Katz had stuck to her part of the house and nobody had tried to break in while he was away.

It was unsustainable really to only be able to grab a few minutes with them while none of the others were looking and generally when he was supposed to be doing something else important.

If he was honest, he was less worried about the risk of infection at that point than he was about having the omegas around other Alphas. If the disease was transmitted by air or by blood one of the others would have been showing symptoms by now. And Bella would have shown if there was any special risk to omegas.

There was still a risk of looters or possibly some of the infected breaking in but if they could secure a better perimeter around the house, he would be more comfortable bringing the pups up for a few hours at a time and possibly even letting them out in the garden to get some fresh air and sunlight.

When his shift was over, he woke up Alana and Zeller to take the next watch.

While they were distracted getting their weapons and agreeing which post they would take, Hannibal went back downstairs and found Will's condition was the same. He lifted him up and brought him into the storeroom next door where they could lie on the sofa together. It was a little bit dusty, but Will seemed slightly happier to at least not be in the bedroom anymore and to have the Alpha there.

Randall brought over a pile of pillow and blankets for all of them and then lay down on the floor next to the sofa. Hannibal told him he was welcome to the whole bed in the other room but he didn't want to be on his own.

Stroking Will's hair, Hannibal could feel the omega relaxing against his chest and then beginning to breathe more evenly. He found that the scent of both of them so close by made him sleepy almost at once. He was always surprised by how much they were able to affect him more often than not without his even noticing it.

Lying here like this it seemed ridiculous to even worry that the other Alphas were a threat to what he had with his omegas. He would give Will a choice about who to mate with when he had his first heat because that's what the omega needed, but he was confident that in five or six more years their bond would be unbreakable. After only a few months, the pup was attuned to his Alpha's thoughts and emotions in a way that Hannibal had never experienced before and to an extent that was almost unnerving. He realised that he needed to be even more on-guard around the pup than he usually was but the more he tried to shield his feelings the more Will seemed to sense that something was off and to pursue them.

As Hannibal drifted off, he felt an overwhelming sense of affection for his two pups and was rewarded with a contented hum from Will wrapped around his chest.

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Hannibal sat on the big sofa in the music room watching his mother put little jewels into torn up pieces of bread and then swallow them. It all seemed very unfair. When he was much younger, one of his favorite things to do was rolling her pearl necklaces around in his mouth and his sire would always spank him for it, saying he was going to choke one of these days.

Mischa was crying because she was dressed in so many layers of winter clothes she could barely move or see anything. She had gone over to try to turn the radio on. They were usually allowed to listen to their favorite music programs in this room while drinking hot apple cider after dinner. But this time their mother had snapped at her to keep the radio turned off.

Hannibal climbed off the sofa and went to stand next to her. He reached a hand into the side of her hood and through the heavy scarf covering half of her face and gave her earlobe a little rub between his thumb and first finger.

The little omega interrupted her crying with something like a giggle and then reached up to do the same to him. Ever since she was whelped, their mother had always said that Hannibal was the only one who could get her to stop crying once she really got started.

Their sire came in wearing his blue dress uniform and carrying two suitcases stuffed so heavily they almost dragged along the ground. He leaned down to give each of his children a kiss on the cheek and to ruffle Hannibal's hair. Hannibal played with the epaulettes on his uniform for a second wishing that he was still small enough to be carried like his little sister was.

Their mother picked Mischa up while their sire put on another heavy overcoat and then picked up the bags again instructing Hannibal to hold on to the strap of one of them so he wouldn't get lost. He wanted to ask why they were going out the back way through the woods when the road had already been plowed but his sire didn't seem to be in the mood for answering questions.

A blast of cold air hit them as they opened the door at the back of the pantry.

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Hannibal sat up with a start and realised that Will was no longer on the sofa with him and a cold draft was coming in through the door. He stepped carefully over Randall who was still asleep on the floor next to him and then paced quickly into the corridor. The draft was coming from the right, from the direction of the trap door, and he chased after it with a terrible premonition that Will was defying him and had decided to go upstairs on his own.

When he reached the trap door, however, he could see that it was still closed. Then he noticed that the freezer door was wide open.

Walking in he saw Will halfway towards the back running his hand down one of the long loin roasts stacked on a shelf. He was still barefoot and dressed only in his pyjamas but didn't seem to notice the cold at all.

"Will," Hannibal said softly but urgently. The omega did not respond and was still turned away from him.

Hannibal took a few quick paces into the freezer, the metal floor stinging his bare feet, and then picked Will up and carried him out. The omega didn't struggle at all or seem to notice that Hannibal was there.

Back in the corridor and with the freezer door shut, Hannibal knelt down and found that the pup's eyes were unfocused and his lids were drooping.

"Will," he said again giving him a gentle shake. Will turned around in his arms and then started to walk into the wall.

Hannibal stopped him and lifted him up again. This time the pup responded a little better by wrapping his arms around Hannibal's neck and resting his head on his shoulder.

"You're sleepwalking, pup," Hannibal told him fondly, rubbing his cold back.

"Why can't we use the road?" the omega responded reaching up to rub the Alpha's earlobe between his thumb and first finger.

Hannibal froze for a second despite himself. "What did you say?"

"Why can't we use the bed?" the pup mumbled dropping his hand and then rubbing his own earlobe.

"We can," Hannibal told him. "Would you be more comfortable there?"

The omega made a circular head movement against his chest that was both a nod yes and a shake no.

Hannibal carried him into the bedroom, placed him carefully on the bed and then made a few more trips to the storage room to retrieve Randall and then the rest of their blankets and pillows.

Both of the omegas seemed to be sleeping soundly now, but Hannibal decided to close and lock the bedroom door before joining them just in case.

# Compartmentalisation

The omegas were making puppy dog eyes at Hannibal when he moved towards the door after feeding them their breakfast. Then they started begging him to either stay longer or let them come with him. Finally, as he was about to shut the door, they started crying just a shade away from the distress tone that would have compelled him to go back in and comfort them.

He did manage to get the door shut and to get back up into the wine cellar without going back to check on them but only by exercising extreme self-discipline.

As he walked into the kitchen, he ran into Bedelia sipping her morning coffee and looking out into the garden as if nothing even slightly out of the ordinary was going on.

She started when she saw him and he realised he was standing there in rumpled pyjamas, his hair a mess.

“You look tired,” she told him coming around the counter to pour a second cup of coffee for him. “What’s wrong?”

“Unfortunately, I didn’t sleep very soundly,” he told her accepting the coffee and holding it under his nose as if the steam itself could wash some of the exhaustion off his face.

“You’re worried about your omegas,” she told him in a matter of fact tone. Hannibal was briefly annoyed that the entire world now seemed to have an open window into his innermost thoughts and feelings.

“Will is coping very poorly with the confinement,” he decided to tell her. “He won’t sleep unless I stay with them and is sleepwalking and having nightmares.”

“It’s very stressful for omegas to be separated from their Alpha for extended periods of time.”

“Everything seems to be very stressful for omegas... I can’t leave them downstairs and I can’t bring them upstairs.”

“What are you worried about if you bring them upstairs?”

“That someone will break in and I won’t be able to protect them.”

“So if the house was better defended, you would be more comfortable letting them up into it.”

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed after thinking for a few moments. “If I was confident that I would have enough warning to get the omegas back downstairs if I needed to, then I would be comfortable with letting them come upstairs for at least part of the day.”

Finishing his coffee, he took a quick shower, got dressed and went into the study to get a few pieces of paper and a pencil. Back in the kitchen, the rest of the group were having breakfast.

He quickly sketched his block and several of the neighbouring blocks. There were seven houses on the west side of his block including Hannibal's, and then the church next door and on the corner. Then there were ten houses on the east side, three on the north and six on the south flanking the entrances to the back alley that led to all of the garages.

"If we barricaded these two roads at the north and south sides and both entrances to the alley, secured the houses around this block and the ones facing us on either side and then shored up the iron railings around the church, we would have a solid perimeter for this block," Hannibal said mostly to himself.

"The belltower in the church is one of the highest points for several blocks," Jack added coming up behind him to look over his shoulder. "If we post a sentry there and at the other three corners of the block we'd have a better advanced warning system."

"We should also see if anyone else is still alive and not sick in one of the other houses," Alana added. "The more people we have coordinated and working together, the easier it will be."

"What do we do with the people that are sick?" Katz asked. They all fell silent and looked at their feet.

"Can we just lock them up somewhere in their houses where they can't get out?" Price suggested.

"We wouldn't be safe," Hannibal replied.

Jack agreed, "The point is to create a secure area that we know is clear. We can't secure an area where there is any chance those things could potentially break out or keep exposing us to a mutated form of the virus. And it's too risky for the people trying to corral them. It's not worth losing some of you on the off chance that we can maybe cure the infection at some point in the future."

"So we just kill all of them?" Katz asked with disbelief.

"If there is a no-risk way to lure them outside the perimeter, use it. Otherwise, we need to prioritise our own safety and put them out of their misery."

"Even the ones that are just sick and haven't turned yet?" Alana asked.

"If they are still in the early stages, we should see if there's a way to treat them," Katz added. "Maybe we can figure out why some of us seem to be immune while other people succumb so quickly. We also need to understand the progression of the disease and the mortality rate."

"Fine," Jack said. "If their blood is still red and they don't attack you isolate them somewhere they can be observed and treated without exposing the rest of us. If they have black blood or make even the slightest aggressive move, put them down."

Relieved to finally have a mission, Jack set about organising everything. They split into two teams of four each with Bella staying home to sort and inventory whatever they brought back

with them. They would take turns climbing with ladders over the fences into the neighbours' back gardens, checking the houses thoroughly and, if no one was left alive inside, taking any cars whenever it was reasonably clear and using them to block part of the alley or one of the roads. Then they would return to Hannibal's house to rest while the other team checked the next house. They decided to save the church for last and go in with most of the group together because there was no way of knowing how many people were in there.

Hannibal had four katanas which the teams took turns carrying. They also carried guns but Jack instructed them to use them as sparingly as possible both because ammunition was limited and to avoid the noise attracting more infected. They wore disinfected gas masks which they had taken off the looters as an additional precaution.

Hannibal brought two ladders over to the side wall of his garden, allowing Jack, Katz, Price and Alana to climb onto the garage roof. They pulled the second ladder up onto the roof, walked over to the adjoining neighbour's garage and then dropped the ladder down into their garden.

The house belonged to Miss Matilda Ogle who was eighty-seven, largely blind and confined to a wheelchair. She adored Hannibal who sometimes helped her with heavy lifting in the garden and brought her marzipan pastries every Easter.

Jack told him later that Miss Ogle had been partially eaten by her homecare nurse, who they managed to trap and behead in a closet. Miss Ogle was still animate and trying to wheel herself after them when they ended her suffering.

They piled the bodies in the garden, then went through room by room to check that there were no other occupants in the house. This was also confirmed by the note left on the door for FEMA. Once they were sure there was no one left, they barricaded the front door and windows and back gate with the furniture and piled anything useful next to the ladder to be taken back to Hannibal's house.

It took the better part of two hours to clear and secure the first house but Jack was confident they would get quicker once they had their system down.

Finally, Jack took the keys to Miss Ogle's Lincoln Continental and, once Abigail gave the all clear from the roof of the garage, drove it out into the alley to partially block the way in from the north.

When the car was in position, he leapt out and ran back to Hannibal's gate where Bedelia let him in. Looking back, he could see Price, Alana and Katz lifting suitcases full of scavenged food, batteries and medicine down the ladders.

Hannibal was sorry to hear that Miss Ogle had not survived but was glad to see that she still had unparalleled good taste in caviar, foie gras and truffles.

They decided to try one more house before nightfall so Hannibal, Zeller, Abigail and Bedelia climbed through Miss Ogle's yard and into the yard of the next neighbour over, the Hammonds. Mr and Mrs Hammond were empty nesters with four or five grown children. He

worked in insurance and she sat on the boards of various political organisations. He had both of their cards in his Rolodex but had not had an occasion to use them yet.

They found the Hammonds, four of their children or children-in-law, and several grandchildren wandering around in their ground floor dining room, obviously infected. Zeller was about to climb back to tell Jack they needed more help when Abigail started tapping the handle of her katana on the metal porch railing so they lined up at the back door and could only come out one by one once it was opened.

Bedelia pulled the sliding glass door partially open and they took turns dispatching the Hammonds one by one.

They all hesitated, however, when the last one shuffled out, a male omega cub of about five or six. Abigail froze, unable to swing at him even as he snarled and lunged for her. Bedelia had to step in and put him out of his misery severing his neck in a single smooth motion.

Hannibal could see that Abigail was shaking afterwards, although she was determined not to let it show. While Zeller went to get the list off the door to check it against the infected they had already found, Abigail stood looking at the Hammond's Christmas tree and the stack of presents under it.

"Don't blame yourself," Bedelia told her. "We're only doing what we have to do and it's putting them at peace."

"You can't really think of them as people anymore," Hannibal added. "They certainly don't see you that way. There's no sin in defending yourself."

"Yes, I know," Abigail replied brusquely kneeling down to start tearing wrapping paper off the nearest presents. There was nothing vaguely useful except for a titanium rod and reel and some boxes of chocolates.

"One of them is missing," Zeller announced after checking the line of bodies against the photo they had put out on their door. "Another kid – Daniel - eight years old."

"I'll check upstairs," Hannibal told them.

He found the other infected child on his hands and knees in the master bedroom clawing at the closet doors. He quickly put the snarling creature out of its misery. A few seconds later he could hear a very faint whimpering on the other side of the door.

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Will leapt out of his armchair as soon as he heard the trap door open. Hannibal had left the bedroom door unlocked that morning, just locking a few doors to some of the rooms with more dangerous equipment in them and the trap door itself.

After the Alpha had left, Will and Randall made a half-hearted exploration of the other rooms but then ended up back in the bedroom again with nothing to do. They wanted fresh air and someone else to talk to, not more dusty rooms and boxes.

Will ran down the corridor to greet the Alpha but was surprised instead to see Dr Bloom coming down the stairs with a large shoebox under one arm. Hannibal was right behind her and closed the trap after them.

“Hello Dr Bloom,” Will said looking down at her shoes which were covered in mud. He could still smell the crisp winter air on her clothes.

“Hello sweetheart,” she told him giving him a quick hug around the shoulders and a kiss on the forehead before moving down the corridor.

“Where’s your brother?” Hannibal asked him.

“Still asleep,” Will replied following them closely.

“It’s this one,” Hannibal told Dr Bloom holding the door open for her. It was the room with all the old medical equipment.

“What’s wrong?” Will asked trying to see if either of them had hurt themselves anywhere.

“Nothing pup, do you want to see?” Hannibal replied.

Will nodded enthusiastically and Hannibal lifted him up under the arms so he had a better view of the top of the examination table.

Dr Bloom put the shoe box down and took the lid off. Will gasped when he saw that there was a small tri-coloured puppy dog in it. It seemed barely to be moving but its head tilted a little as Dr Bloom lifted it out. Will could see a slightly tattered red ribbon had been tied around its neck.

“Where did you find him?”

“In one of the neighbour’s houses... there’s an electrolyte solution in the refrigerator behind you,” Hannibal told Dr Bloom putting Will down for a moment.

Dr Bloom got a bag of liquid and Hannibal pulled a small needle, plastic tubing and some bandages out of a drawer. Will pulled a chair over so he could kneel on it and watch.

“I’m not sure about the dosage,” Dr Bloom told them. “We’ll need to monitor him closely.”

She warmed the liquid under the tap while Hannibal removed the ribbon, carefully shaved an area between the puppy’s shoulder blades and inserted the needle. The poor little thing was so weak it barely responded.

“He’s going to feel cold when we start giving him the fluids,” Hannibal explained to Will. “Go get the towels from your bathroom and I’ll bring you some more later when I come down with your dinner.”

Not wanting to miss a second, Will raced back to their bathroom, grabbed the towels and a throw from the armchair for good measure and then ran back to the medical room.

“Good boy,” Hannibal told him, stroking the back of Will’s head. The Alpha folded the throw several times and set the puppy on top arranging rolls of towels on each side to enclose him and placing a flap of the last towel gently across his back.

Meanwhile Dr Bloom rolled over a hook to hang the bag from and attached the end of the tubing to the needle. She adjusted a dial on the tubing to control the flow rate.

“Is he hungry?” Will asked reaching over to very gently pet the top of the puppy’s head. Its eyelashes fluttered slightly but that was the only response.

“The fluids include all the nutrients he needs for the moment,” Dr Bloom explained. “He needs to get some more strength back before he’ll be able to eat solid food.”

“I’ll bring something down with dinner though and you can try feeding him if he’s feeling better,” Hannibal added. Will gave the puppy a very gentle pet under the chin and then lit up with a big smile when the puppy extended his little tongue slightly to just touch his finger. It felt very dry and raspy.

“Have you ever had a puppy before, Will?” Dr Bloom was asking him.

He shook his head no. “I asked for one every Christmas but our sire said we couldn’t because we were always travelling.”

“Well, if you can take very good care of this puppy and he gets better, maybe your Alpha will let you keep this one...”

“Can I?” Will asked, swivelling around to ask Hannibal. “Please?”

“He’s very sick Will. I don’t think he’s had anything to eat for a few days and he’s still very young.”

“But if he does get better...”

“If he does get better, we’ll see. A puppy is a very big responsibility.”

“Please... I read every book in the libraries about how to take care of them. I know you have to feed them and give them water and take them for walks and how to train them and give them baths and clean their teeth...”

“OK, pup,” Hannibal said, smiling and kissing the top of his head. “If he gets better, we’ll see.”

“What do you want to call him?” Dr Bloom asked.

“Max,” Will replied without a moment’s hesitation.

# Introduction

When Hannibal came down to the omegas' room a few days later, he was delighted to see both pups on all fours teasing the border collie puppy with an improvised toy made from an empty toilet paper roll and a mesh sponge on a rope.

The dog responded very well to the fluid therapy, thanks to Will hovering over it and sending Hannibal what felt like quarter-hourly updates. By the second day it was eating solid food and clambering after Will everywhere. And now it seemed almost fully recovered.

Hannibal could see a remarkable difference in the omegas as well now that they had something concrete to occupy their attention. Will still wouldn't sleep unless Hannibal came down with them, but at least they weren't moping around all day and clinging to him when he had to leave.

They beamed up at him when he came in the room and then continued to yank the toy across the floor and throw it back and forth between each other to try to entice the puppy to chase it.

Hannibal sat down in one of the chairs and watched them for a few more minutes while they chattered back and forth at each other and at the dog. He couldn't remember ever seeing them as relaxed and happy as they were at that moment.

For a moment, it helped him forget entirely about his own exhaustion from the slow and tedious task of clearing houses. After three days they were still less than half done and hadn't found another living soul. Meanwhile larger and larger groups of the infected seemed to be starting to gather just outside each of the barricades as quickly as they were able to set them up.

However, all of their hard work meant that in only a few more days he would be able to bring the pups upstairs at least for part of the time. That meant he needed to work on their manners and socialisation if they were going to be around the rest of the group continually.

"Come here pups," he told them. "Come kneel over here next to me."

They looked briefly hesitant to abandon their game but then shuffled over on their knees obediently until they were facing him in the chair. The puppy followed after them worrying at the hem of Will's pants.

Hannibal stood up briskly, collected the dog under one arm, ordered the omegas to stay and then carried the dog into the bathtub where he left him with a chew toy covered in peanut butter to occupy himself with. He shut the door to the bathroom on his way out and then made his way back to the chair.

The two omegas were looking at him with some apprehension now, having noticed the rattan cane that he had brought in with him and left leaning against the chair.

“It’s OK, pups,” he reassured them. “We have some work we need to do and I require your complete attention, do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” they replied promptly and he gave them each an affectionate pat on the head in reward.

“Right now, my colleagues and I are working very hard to make sure it’s safe for you two to come upstairs at least part of the time. In a few days, I should be able to bring you upstairs and introduce you to them.”

The pups grinned broadly first at each other and then at him.

“Did your sire ever teach you how to present yourselves when you’re formally introduced to someone new?”

They both shook their heads no after a moment’s consideration.

“That’s fine, I can teach you now. It’s more important for you, Randall, because you’re my mate and how you behave in front of other people reflects on me. But it’s also never too early for you to start to learn Will. It’s very important that you send the right messages with your behaviour. Otherwise there can be all sorts of unfortunate misunderstandings.”

“Yes, Alpha,” they agreed although they still looked a little confused.

“Stand up,” he told them and the two omegas scrambled to their feet.

“I’m going to bring the others down here, I think. Turn around and face the door. Good boys.” Hannibal shifted them so that they were standing in an even line facing the entrance with Randall on the right, closest to the door, and Will on the left.

“Stand up straight and cross your arms behind your backs, keep your eyes at about the level of their navals. Pull your stomach in a little Will. Yours can relax, Randall,” he instructed them as he circled around adjusting the angles of their arms and how they were holding their hands together. He used the markings on the cane to measure the gaps between their arms and the distance between their clasped hands and the waistband of their pants.

The differences in their height meant that their jaws were at different angles when they tried to keep their eyes focused at the right level. Hannibal decided that a uniform angle for both of them was more important than each having the technically correct angle so he adjusted both of them to a median position and then stood back to review the effect.

When he was happy with their positioning, he gave them each a piece of chocolate and told them to take a few moments to remember it for when they stood up again.

As they were eating, the puppy gave a lonely mournful howl from the bathtub and Will partially turned to look at the door.

Hannibal brought the cane down with swift whistle on his backside. Will spit the chocolate out, more from surprise than pain and turned around to look wide eyed at the Alpha.

“The puppy is fine where he is, Will, and I told you that I expect your complete attention right now. When I put you in a position, stay there until I give you permission to move. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” the pup responded giving a little sniffle with his eyes cast down and trying to remember which position he had been in. Hannibal helped him back.

“When I come in, I want you both to kneel down at the same time, like this.”

When they were both on their knees he continued adjusting them so that the backs of their necks were presented at just the right angle, their legs were in the right position and their feet were crossed behind them.

“Fold your hands over your stomachs,” he told them. Then he adjusted Randall’s folded hands lower so they sat under the slight bulge of his stomach instead of over it.

“Pull your shoulders back and curve your back a little, Randall,” he told him, holding his shoulders in position with one hand while he pushed his lower back forward slightly. The curve of the pup’s belly was much more obvious when he finally stopped fidgeting.

“There, hold that position and remember it.” He gave them each another chocolate.

“When I introduce you, bend forward at the waist and drop your head down so they can see the backs of your necks.” He showed them how far he wanted them to go and how long to stay there before letting them come back up and rewarding them again.

“In the future, when you see me for the first time in the morning or when I come back to the house, I want you to kneel down like this except lift your hands up by your ears, palms up and, Randall, you uncross your feet and keep them parallel to each other.”

After some more adjustments, Hannibal asked them, “Can you remember both positions?”

“Yes, Alpha,” the two omegas said.

“How do you bow when I introduce you?” They returned to the previous position. “And how do you greet your Alpha?”

When they showed him, he gave them each another piece of chocolate.

“Stand up again when I tell you. Push back onto your heels and stand up in one motion. Don’t scramble around. And now stand again the way I taught you until I say “sufficient.” That means you can behave normally again. Good pups. Let’s practice some more.”

He had them stand, kneel, present and stand up again over and over again. In each position he would measure and adjust them, rapping with the cane any body parts that were out of position or that moved without permission.

Will had excellent muscle memory and was patient enough to hold position until he was rewarded but Randall struggled to remember multiple instructions at once and was constantly

fidgeting besides. Hannibal could see that the pup was getting frustrated and sore and that watching his younger brother get praised and rewarded was distracting him.

“That’s enough for today, Will, thank you. You’re doing very well.” Hannibal told him giving him a kiss on the top of the head. “We can keep practicing tomorrow. In the meantime, why don’t you play with the dog while Randall and I practice some more in the other room.”

The older pup looked crestfallen as Hannibal led him into the storage room. The Alpha thought about giving him a break but they only had a few days to get it right and Randall’s performance as his mate had to be flawless or he wouldn’t be able to let the omegas upstairs. If his omega couldn’t kneel or present properly it would signal to the other Alphas that Hannibal was ineffective at handling him and that their bond was weak. A rival Alpha would see that as an invitation.

Hannibal put Randall through the paces a few more times, each one worse than the last. Now the pup was having trouble standing up straight because of the marks on the soles of his feet from forgetting to cross them. Hannibal decided to focus on at least getting the kneeling and presenting positions right.

“Arch your back,” Hannibal told him for the tenth time kneeling behind him to show him the correct angle again. “I want them all to see what a good pup you are getting round and full with your master’s cub.”

When the omega finally held the correct position for a decent length of time, Hannibal praised him and then gave him an affectionate pat on the ass. He was surprised to find that the seat of the omega’s pants was soaking.

He stood up and walked around looking down at the pup. He could see that he was erect and that his cheeks were flushed with humiliation. He could smell now how aroused the little omega had gotten just from being positioned by his Alpha.

“Randall,” he said, more bemused than scolding. “How are you going to learn anything like that?”

“Sorry, Alpha,” the omega responded with his head still hung.

Hannibal lifted him up and bent him over the arm of the sofa, careful to avoid any pressure on his belly. Then he reached around to knead at his pup’s groin through his pants while draping himself over his back. As his own cock started to stiffen, he ground it up and into the omega’s wet seat.

“Are you having trouble concentrating?” Hannibal asked.

The omega whimpered, bit his lip and finally shot out, “Yes, Alpha. Sorry.”

“Will you be able to pay attention better if I fill you up first?”

Randall nodded his head enthusiastically. “Yes, Alpha. Please.”

Hannibal stepped back a little and tugged the omega's pants down to his knees. There was a beautiful pink blush on the pup's haunches. The Alpha had only been swatting them with the cane to keep their attention – not to cause any kind of persistent damage.

His omega's rump was glossy from all the slick that had spread around it. Hannibal started to lick it up relishing the heat radiating from the pup's skin. He tasted like buttery honey with his usual light jasmine and orange notes. Hannibal found himself opening his mouth wider and wider to take in more of the pup and then gently biting down on the ridges of flesh this created for him.

The omega started writhing and crying out in a feeble protest for his aching backside.

Hannibal moved both hands to the omega's hips to steady him.

"If you're a good boy for me and you hold perfectly still where I put you, I'm going to fuck you until my come starts leaking out of your ears. But if you disobey me and move without permission, I'm going to get dressed again and you're going to stand here like this until you dry up. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alpha," the omega panted unsure if he was even allowed to open his mouth wider.

Hannibal moved the pup's arms so that he was better braced against the sofa arm and then took off his suit slowly, folding it neatly in a pile on the other side of the sofa. He was aware all the time of the omega's increasing agitation as well as his determination not to let it show.

When he finished undressing, the Alpha moved around behind the pup. Taking himself in hand, he rubbed his cock up and down along the edge of the omega's furrow to start to wet it. Randall moaned deeply but managed to hold still.

Hannibal gave him an approving pat on the ass and then started nudging his cock slowly but insistently into the omega's passage. He was wet enough to sink all the way into on the first slide but the Alpha wanted to test his composure.

Randall squinted but stayed in position as Hannibal worked himself in and then gave a long panting sigh when the Alpha bottomed out.

Gripping the sofa arm on either side of the pup's shoulders, Hannibal began a series of punishingly slow slides up and into the little omega. In truth, if the pup was moving, the Alpha probably wouldn't have known it. His eyes were closed and the only thing he could focus on was the exquisite friction of the warm, tight ridges of the passage encasing him.

Hannibal's lengthy, powerful thrusts pushed the omega forward and over the arm where he was afraid to move himself back again. The Alpha gripped him around the chest to pull him back but then eventually lost patience with having to do this each time. He pinned the omega's chest to the sofa arm with his weight, wrapping over him and then stepped up his pace.

As Hannibal's knot started to grow, the omega tensed and struggled to hold still and started to wail and mouth at the sofa cushion.

The Alpha groaned as his knot caught hold and then growled out his climax deep inside the omega. When the hot rushes subsided, he reached around to give the pup a few brisk strokes to finish him off and was rewarded with a second round of luscious contractions around his cock.

Lifting the omega up under his legs, Hannibal carried him onto the sofa where they could lie down side by side.

“That’s sufficient, pup,” the Alpha told him with another pat on the side of his rear. “You were a very good boy for me.”

The omega dropped his arms at once and chased contact back against his Alpha. The pup was squirming so much now that he was finally allowed to move, Hannibal couldn’t resist rolling over slightly to contain him better and then rutting even more into his tender hole.

This turned into a third round for Hannibal who was able to use the leverage from one leg on the floor to plant himself even deeper in the omega. The pup was clutching to the edges of the cushions like he thought the floor was about to open up under them.

When he had finished again, the Alpha lay curled around his omega gnawing at his earlobe and sucking on the side of his neck and shoulder.

“You’re mine,” Hannibal told him bluntly. “I just want to make sure everyone else knows it the second they see you.”

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It took them five days to clear the remaining houses on Hannibal’s block and to set up vehicle barricades on the surrounding streets and the back alley. They found black-blooded infected in almost every house, but no one else who was still alive. The only other living things they saw were pigeons, crows and increasingly feral cats.

The number of infected wandering the streets seemed to grow every day but they showed no interest in or ability to climb over or under cars or other significant obstructions once they had been put in place.

In each house, they moved all of the furniture to block the ground floor doors and windows or to shore up the fences or railings correcting houses where they were detached. Once the alley was secure, it was much easier to move the stockpiles from each new house into Hannibal’s garden.

They found a reasonable amount of food in each house as well as clothes for the others, a few handguns, medicine and other useful tools and potential weapons like axes and knives. Most of the infected seemed to have fallen within the first few days and hadn’t made serious preparations to either evacuate or dig in.

The church took an entire day by itself. There were hundreds of infected just in the nave, including a large number of children. Even after they left the doors open for a day to let them

clear out by themselves, there were still dozens milling around who had to be isolated and carefully dispatched.

Then it took hours to better barricade and shore up the cast iron railings that ran around the church and its small yard mostly using the pews from the church itself. Infected started congregating on the other side of the railings as soon as they saw them moving around in the yard and they had to be careful to avoid all the arms reaching through. They had begun to stink of decay and seemed increasingly desperate to find food. They beheaded dozens more of them along the railings as they moved parts of the barricade into place.

Zeller and Price questioned continually whether or not it was worth including the church in their perimeter but Jack insisted that the tower, once it was secure would be invaluable to their defences. Climbing to the top, Hannibal could see his point. There was a reasonably clear view of the roads approaching his block from all directions. A guard posted there would be able to give a warning to the others and would have a clean shot from a protected position.

Once they finished in the church, they moved all of the bodies they had found in the houses into a yard for a house on the opposite side of the block to Hannibal's and made a bonfire.

It was exhausting work, particularly because they had to also arrange night watch shifts, but they tried to rest as much as they could.

Finally, on Christmas Eve, Hannibal told the others over breakfast that he had a basement where they could store some of the recovered supplies that were currently cluttering up the halls and corners of the house. He also suggested that there might be some additional items, amongst his uncle's many things, that might be useful for them.

Hannibal led them down into the basement cautiously monitoring every micro-reaction. Alana and Bedelia were on watch, but Jack, Bella, Abigail, Katz, Zeller, and Price filed down the steps after him. He would have preferred to reveal the basement to them one by one so that it would be easier to react appropriately to each response but unfortunately there was no plausible way to stop one of them from telling the others so he decided it was best to rip the bandage off quickly.

"You thought there might be something useful down here..." Jack was saying as he looked in the freezer. When he closed the door again, it was just short of a slam.

"My uncle experienced significant... instability... during his youth in Lithuania during the war. He was eight when our ancestral home was taken by the Nazis and twelve when the Soviets appropriated it. I'm afraid it left him with some idiosyncratic attitudes to property and to the power of the state. He used his remaining wealth to build a number of homes in different countries where he felt that he could be secure no matter what the circumstances and to retrieve as much of our family's property as possible after the fall of the Soviet Union."

"As I was raised by my uncle, I'm afraid that some of his paranoia as well as some of his hoarding tendencies may have rubbed off. It's certainly not personal, Jack. I couldn't be sure before how long we would be staying here and if the rest of you did decide to evacuate then my position would be less exposed if I did not tell you. I'm sure you can understand my perspective."

“And now...”

“Now it is clear that we may all be here for some time and I think it puts us all at best advantage to know all of the facts.”

Hannibal led them down the corridor showing them each room in turn. Katz squealed in delight to see the lab and wanted to start poking into each of the cabinets but Hannibal led her along.

“My uncle also built an escape passage into the garage which you should all be aware of in case...”

Hannibal cut himself off in response to the silence that had spread as each member of the group noticed the bedroom and walked into it.

Stepping into the bedroom himself, he was proud to see the omegas kneel down exactly as he had taught them to. Will was wearing a vertically striped tunic in muted jewel tones that Hannibal had cut down for him from one of his own jackets. He had a plain white training collar on and his curls had remained more or less as Hannibal had painstakingly arranged them. The dog was nibbling at his stockinged feet but Will was doing a good job of ignoring him.

Randall was wearing one of Lady Murasaki’s old thigh length silk tunics because he was too tall and broad in the shoulders to fit any of the other omega clothes and there hadn’t been enough time to custom design something from scratch. It was dark green with a wide embroidered border covered with wisteria vines and small woodland animals like stoats and foxes.

He was wearing one of her favourite collars as well – a rich black leather embroidered with red camellias. It rested low on his neck just above the slits in the shoulders of the tunic that showed off his mating mark.

He looked a little embarrassed to be shown off this way but just enough to lend a healthy flush to his cheeks.

“This is my mate, Randall,” Hannibal explained to the others. “And this is his brother Will, my ward.”

The pups presented perfectly. Hannibal could not have been more proud of them.

“He’s bred,” Jack observed. “How long were you planning to keep this a secret?”

“I obtained them several months ago and Randall quickened during his first heat. It was not my intention to keep anything a secret but I did not want to risk saying anything while he was still in his first trimester. I was planning to tell you about my omegas and about the cub at the dinner party but, obviously, that announcement was interrupted. After that, I was concerned for their health and brought them here so they would not be exposed to anything harmful.”

Hannibal signalled to the omegas that they could stand up again and they managed with acceptable grace and dignity.

Bella stepped over and stroked one of Will's cheeks. "You both presented so well," she told them and then, turning to Hannibal, "They're so beautiful. Both of them."

Jack and the betas moved on to see the escape exit but Bella stayed behind to ask the omegas everything about themselves. Hannibal was pleased to see that after a very brief initial shyness they warmed up to her and started to happily chat about their puppy dog and their favourite books.

When they went back upstairs, they brought the two omegas with them. Hannibal had an arm around each of them and could feel the sigh of relief they each released as they stepped up into the wine cellar and then back into the kitchen.

He let them stay upstairs for the rest of the day as long as they remained in the same room with him and within sight. It was very quiet – a bright winters' day with no sign of the infected anywhere. The pups sat near the open windows where they could feel the fresh air and enjoy the sunlight.

In less than an hour, Bella had entirely adopted them bringing them hot cocoa to drink, sitting on the floor with them, hanging on their every word, her frequent melodic laughter brightening up the entire house.

As he was cooking lunch and watching them, however, Hannibal could sense some lingering tension with Jack and decided to feel him out.

"I apologise again, Jack. It was never my intention to hide anything from you or the others. But the safety of my mate and cub had to be my primary consideration."

"Of course," Jack responded, still somewhat distracted. "If I had known about the safe room, I probably would have insisted that Bella go there as well."

"I'm very relieved to hear that you understand."

"Which omega institute did you get them from?" Jack sipped at his coffee with a show of nonchalance.

"Baltimore State. Dr Bloom works... or rather used to work there."

After a brief pause, Jack continued. "They're very young. I wasn't aware that they could legally be acquired so young."

"There were special circumstances because they were orphaned and it would have been cruel to separate them. Dr Chilton agreed to a contract allowing me to train Randall myself and to foster Will as a companion for him."

"So Will is still unmated."

"Yes, of course. He's still a cub really."

They watched as Will showed Bella the first trick he had taught the dog – an awkward kind of handshake. The dog yipped happily at all three of them in turn and Will broke into a wide and unselfconscious grin.

“Well, you’re obviously a very lucky man, Hannibal.”

“I’m quite aware of it,” Hannibal replied with a tight smile lifting his own coffee in a toast.

# Acclimatisation

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is a little spanky. If that's not your thing, the only actual plot progression is in the last six paragraphs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will woke up smiling at the feeling of soft sunlight on one cheek and Hannibal's velvet pillowcases on the other. Opening his eyes, he could see Randall lying right across from him also looking supremely contented in his sleep.

Coming to a little more, he could remember the Alpha from the previous night agreeing that they could stay in his room but absolutely forbidding Max to be on the bed with them. Rolling over, Will could see that the faithful little puppy had curled up on the carpet just below his side of the bed.

He reached down to scratch Max's head and then noticed the sounds of harpsichord music drifting down the hall and through the open bedroom door.

Turning over again, he could see that Randall was awake now too either from the sounds of the music or from the motion of Will shifting around in the bed. Either way, he gave his brother a happy little trill and then jumped out of bed to investigate the sound.

They walked down the hall to the music room together peeking curiously in some of the guest bedrooms where the doors had been left open. They weren't used to seeing signs of occupation in any of them and the scents of so many strangers all at once was a little confusing.

In particular, Will didn't like the scent of the beta girl who wore a scarf around her neck in their old bedroom but he supposed it wasn't really reasonable to begrudge her one room when they had the run of the rest of the house.

Randall gave a little gasp when he walked into the music room and Will turned and hurried after him.

At first he didn't entirely understand what he was seeing. Their sire had never been big on holidays – calling them a damned nuisance and an excuse for retailers to separate a few more fools from their money. The only Christmas trees they'd ever really seen before were on TV, at shopping malls, or in the windows of other peoples' houses as they drove by.

But in one corner of the music room was the most perfect Christmas tree Will had ever seen. It was covered in purple and white lights and hundreds of crystal ornaments shaped like snowflakes and icicles. There were dozens of wrapped presents underneath it as well and

ornate decorations along all of the walls and over the windows. The Alpha must have been up half the night putting it all together for them.

He had stopped playing the harpsichord when they came in and turned on the bench to smile at them and watch their reaction. Randall ran over to give him a hug while Will took a closer look at the presents. They all had different, but colour-coordinated, wrapping paper and a tag attached to a ribbon with either “William” or “Randall” written in the most beautiful calligraphy he had ever seen.

“Are they for us?” Will asked trying to sound casual but dying to start ripping in to them.

“Yes, of course,” Hannibal told him. “Do you want to open them?”

Both omegas nodded furiously in unison.

“Why don’t you start with this one?” Hannibal said taking another present off the shelf of the harpsichord and handing it to Will.

Will wanted to rip all the wrapping off sideways but thought that Hannibal might not approve of all his expensive paper being treated that way so he carefully removed the ribbon and then tugged along the seam until the gift was revealed.

It was a dog training manual and the collar that was sitting inside it like a bookmark had the name “Max” stitched into the side of it.

Will burst into tears before he was aware of what he was doing and the next thing he knew Hannibal was pulling him onto his lap and asking what was wrong.

Will sobbed a few more times like a basket case and then managed to explain “It’s nice” in between gasps for air.

Randall had come over to see what was wrong, concluded that Will was just being nuts and went back to ripping through every present he could find with his name on it.

“I can really keep him?” Will asked when he’d managed to calm down a little.

“Yes,” Hannibal replied. “But he is completely your responsibility. Anything he needs, you’re going to provide and if he makes any messes you’re going to clean them up.”

Will nodded along already looking for Max on the floor so he could put the collar on him.

“And when he’s a little older, we’re going to train him to help keep watch over the house and to protect you and your brother. But otherwise, he is all yours.”

Will dropped off his knee and put the collar on the little puppy. Even tightened to the narrowest punch hole it still threatened to tip off his head at any moment.

“Thank you,” Will said standing up and wiping the last tears away from his eyes. “He’s the nicest present I ever got.”

“I glad you like him,” Hannibal said sincerely giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. “But I think if you don’t start opening the rest of your presents soon your brother is going to do it for you.”

Randall had in fact reached the end of his pile of presents and, wrapping himself in the heavy fleece blanket Hannibal had given him, came over to sit on the Alpha’s lap and get his help making out some of the words in the copy of Call of the Wild he’d just opened.

“Thanks,” Randall told him after a few minutes. “But we forgot it was Christmas and didn’t get anything for you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hannibal replied. “Where I come from, it would be unusual for an omega to get gifts for their Alpha. There’s nothing you could possibly get for me that is better than what you give me every day just by agreeing to be mine.”

Will wanted to roll his eyes at the schmaltz but could also tell that the Alpha actually meant it and that Randall, although he would die a thousand painful deaths before admitting it, was eating it up.

After Will finished opening the rest of his presents, mostly interesting looking books, dog toys, and some new clothes, Hannibal had the omegas clean up the paper and then come down to the kitchen where he put the strata he had prepared the night before in the oven.

While the Alpha was preparing the rest of the breakfast and talking to Jack and Abigail, who were just coming in off their watch, Will and Randall went into the dining room where they could see flurries of snow drifting into the garden adding to a dusting that had fallen overnight.

They had never really seen snow in real life before. Their sire didn’t like the cold and would rarely take them much further north than where they were now - certainly not in winter which he liked to spend repairing engines and doing odd jobs around the Gulf Coast.

The fluffy white flakes were rapidly masking everything, giving the garden an enchanted air.

“Isn’t it lovely?” Bella said coming up behind them. “The first time I ever saw snow falling, I was twenty-seven and I still thought it must be some kind of magic.”

“We’ve never seen it before either,” Randall told her.

Max was scratching at the bottom of the door and Will picked him up so he could see better.

“Do you want to see what it feels like?” Bella asked them.

Will wanted to more than anything and nodded in response.

Bella flipped the latch on the door and opened it and the two omegas stepped out onto the patio.

Wearing only their pyjamas and thick wool socks, they could feel the chill as soon as they stepped out of the dining room. But it was a pleasant, bracing sensation compared with the

slight stuffiness inside.

Will reached his hand out from under the wide eaves of the house and could feel the flakes of snow landing gently on it. Randall knelt down to run his hands over the shallow drifts that had settled on the patio tiles and trace figures on them.

Will put Max down for a minute so he could step out from under the eaves and feel the snow falling on both arms and on his face. He laughed when they tickled his cheeks and eyelashes.

The puppy took a few tentative steps into the garden and then started plowing his nose through the snow trying to eat it and skipping around trying to find a less cold place to set his feet.

Bella made a little snowball and threw it towards the fountain. Max chased after the movement and then looked confused, turning around and around, when he couldn't find what she had thrown.

Randall took the rope toy that Will had brought down with him and threw it as hard as he could into the garden. It landed in some bushes behind Max. He heard the sound and turned around to sniff at the bushes but couldn't find it.

Ignoring the biting cold under his feet, Will ran over to retrieve the toy so he could throw it again.

About two thirds of the way to the bushes, he could hear the Alpha calling his name. Turning around, he saw that Randall and Bella had gone back into the house and that Hannibal was standing on the patio motioning for him to come back.

He pointed to Max to explain that he was just going to get him to bring in with him and then turned to finish collecting the puppy who raced along the edge of the bushes just ahead of him.

When he was just inches away from catching Max, he felt Hannibal's arm wrap around his waist and lift him carrying him back into the house. Looking back, he could see that Max was confused about what game they were playing at first but then trailed after them trying to nip at the loose part of Will's sock.

Looking down, Will could see that the patch of bare skin between the bottom of the Alpha's pyjamas and the tops of his leather slippers was turning orange and blue in patches. He tried to look up but Hannibal's grip around him was too strong. He seemed angry but then he didn't seem angry.

Back in the house, Hannibal closed the door behind them just seconds after Max managed to race in. He set Will next to Randall who had his head hung and looked close to crying. Will tried to gauge Hannibal's reaction again but his face was unreadable as he pulled off his wet footwear.

"Go stand in the study, both of you" Hannibal told them as soon as he was done and Will felt his stomach flip. It had been such a perfect day and now everything was ruined.

“I told them they could go outside,” Bella was saying in their defence and stepping partially between them. “It’s not fair for them to get in trouble for it.”

Will would have given her a big hug if he could.

“Are you their Alpha?” Hannibal asked her stonily.

“No,” she replied looking for help from Jack who had just come in from the kitchen.

“No, what?” Hannibal prompted.

“No, Alpha,” Bella replied looking down at her hands which she had begun wringing together.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Jack was barking at Hannibal, his shoulders starting to hunch up for an even stronger follow-up. Their arguing was starting to draw some of the others and Will would have given anything to be able to disappear into the wallpaper at that moment.

Ignoring Jack, Hannibal continued to address Bella evenly. “If you’re not their Alpha, it is not your decision where they go or what I do with them. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha” Bella responded into the floor tears starting to roll down her cheeks.

“Go wait in the study,” Hannibal said turning to address Will and Randall again. “I’m not going to tell you a third time.”

They all but tripped over each other to get around the dining table and out of the room. Will caught Alana’s sympathetic expression which just made everything a hundred times worse.

Behind them, they could still hear Jack arguing with their Alpha in muted and then increasingly open and angry tones.

With the door of the study closed, all they could hear was a dampened version of Jack’s loudest shouts.

They stood on the carpet in the middle of the study for what felt like ages until Hannibal finally came in. He was still carrying his wet slippers and placed them on the ground next to him when he sat in his favourite chair. The two omegas shifted around to stand in a line in front of him.

“When I agreed to let you come upstairs, what did I tell you to do?” Hannibal asked them evenly.

“Stay in the same room” - “Stay where you can see us” they mumbled over each other.

“Look at me please.” Will forced himself to focus on the tip of the Alpha’s nose so that it looked like he was making eye contact without actually having to. He could tell that Hannibal was disappointed in them just from his posture and tone of voice. He felt like if he actually had to see it in his eyes it would sink him. And where the hell was that coming from?

“Is that what you did?”

“No, Alpha,” they whispered.

“Do you know why I told you to stay where I could see you?”

“S’dangerous” Randall replied shifting from one foot to the other.

“That’s right,” Hannibal told them. “So you knew what I expected you to do and you knew why I wanted you to do it. But you decided to disobey me anyway.”

“We just forgot,” Will offered in feeble protest and immediately regretted it when he met the Alpha’s eyes for a second.

“Did you just forget too, Randall?”

His brother was trying to figure out which answer the Alpha wanted to hear but quickly gave up and nodded. At least the truth would be easier for him to remember.

Hannibal paused for quite a while obviously thinking carefully about what he wanted to say. Both omegas were in agony waiting but there was no way to rush things along.

“I don’t want to alarm you pups,” he began before pausing again. “We are in potentially a very dangerous situation. But it is only really dangerous if we don’t all work together and trust each other.”

“Is it the monsters?” Will guessed.

“Yes. But I can manage them so you don’t need to worry about them.” Hannibal reached over and cupped a hand over each of their ears. “I don’t want you to feel afraid all the time. I want you to trust me that I can take care of you and I need to trust that you will do what I tell you to. Can you do that?”

The pups nodded at him in unison.

“That means you stay exactly where I expect you to stay, you come immediately when I call you and you go where I tell you to go without hesitating. If I can’t trust you to do those things, I’m going to have to put you back in the basement until I can. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Alpha,” they replied quickly. Will would do anything not to have to go back downstairs.

“You’re not going to just forget?” Hannibal asked with a very faint teasing smile.

“No, Alpha.”

“OK. Let’s make sure. Come here Will.”

Will stepped over immediately eager to show that he’d learnt his lesson but then his enthusiasm sank as Hannibal manoeuvred him over his knees. The Alpha pulled his far arm

back around to hold him in place and then picked up one of the slippers from the ground.

Even though he could see the Alpha's arm descending from the corner of his eye, Will was still surprised by the loud thwack of the rubber sole on his backside. He started more from the sound than from any actual pain but found that Hannibal was gripping him so securely he could barely move an inch.

Their sire used to belt them all the time – or at least he used to belt Randall all the time and Will now and again. That had been a lot more painful than this but Will was also usually indignant and/or pissed off enough to hold back any tears.

Now he could already feel them starting to well up even though they had barely started.

After a few more smacks it was obvious that Hannibal was hitting harder and the continual burning across his entire backside started his tears flowing. At about ten, Will started blubbering for real and that's when Hannibal let him back up again.

When Will was standing back in place again, the Alpha had Randall lean over and try to touch his toes and then gave him about ten good whacks as well. Randall was already crying just from watching Will get spanked and was a mess by the time Hannibal let him stand up again.

"Now what do you have to say?" Hannibal asked them.

"Sorry, we're sorry," they told him in between sniffles.

"And what are you going to do next time to show me you've learnt your lesson?"

"Stay put... come when you tell us to... do what you say," they offered.

"Good pups," he replied giving them each a steadying hug and kiss on the temple and then leading them over to the chaise lounge where they could lie down with their heads on his lap.

Will felt exhausted and started to drift off even though it was only mid-morning and his ass was burning. Hannibal was working on a sketch of something but would stop every once in a while to rub their backs or bend over to give them another quick kiss.

Finally Will woke up as Hannibal was standing and asking if they wanted to help him make lunch. They trailed after him first up into the bedroom to change into real clothes and wash up and then down to the kitchen.

The Alpha had them stand at the counter shelling pistachio nuts while he prepared a pork roast and half a dozen side dishes. He stuffed the roast with dates and the pistachio nuts and then put it in the oven.

Then they followed him back into the study and read for about an hour while lunch was cooking.

When they came back out into the dining room, the rest of the group were waiting for them. Bella shot them an apologetic look and Will tried to convey back to her that it was

unnecessary with his expression. She still looked really sad though.

They all moved around the table, Hannibal sitting at one end and Jack at the other. Will watched how gracefully Bella knelt for Jack and envied her what seemed like a completely natural elegance. If he trained with Hannibal for a hundred million years he would never be able to be as refined as she was. And he could tell, just from Hannibal's expression, that that's what he really wanted from his omegas.

He knelt down as well as he could next to Randall and looking up could see that the Alpha was smiling at him and then pushing his hair back. He thinks it's just a matter of time and training until we both act like Bella, Will thought to himself. He doesn't think there are any other factors that are important.

Once they were all seated, they served themselves from the central dishes onto their individual plates. There was some stilted conversation, mostly between the betas, peppered with compliments on the dishes.

Abruptly Jack announced, "I've decided to move into one of the other houses. Number nine on the north side of the block next to the alley. I think it will be better for our defences to spread out a little in case we're attacked at night. Bella will be coming with me. And any of the rest of you if you like."

"None of the other houses have electricity or hot water or working stoves," Katz pointed out after a moment.

"Well hopefully Hannibal won't mind if we continue to use the facilities here when we need them."

Looking up, Will could see that Hannibal was nodding impassively.

"I just think it will be for the best if we all give each other a little more space... now that we have it."

"That sounds sensible," Hannibal replied.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long. Youtubed "puppies playing in snow" for research and fell down the rabbit hole.

# Extension

The squeal of air brakes under his bedroom window may not have been the single most beautiful sound Jack had ever heard but it was certainly in the top ten. He could barely remember the last time he had heard traffic noises.

Pulling back the curtains, he could see a tri-tone beige motorhome pulled up next to the railings in front of the house Jack had moved into a few days before. It was late-model and expensive looking, more like a bus than a camper van. He could see some shifting around inside but the angle and tint of the windows made it difficult to see how many people were inside or what they looked like.

After a few moments, however, one of the sunroofs opened and a man boosted his head and arms through. He was classically handsome, wearing a suit and a wide grin.

“Hello there,” he said. “You and your sign are a sight for sore eyes.”

The man pointed to the banner Jack had hung out of his window – a bedsheet with “Still Alive” painted on it. He had hung another from the church tower which he hoped would be visible from the highway overpass.

The infected started to gather around the sides of the RV as soon as it stopped, moaning and banging into it but unable to climb up or reach the occupant.

“Have you been driving around long?” Jack called out motioning behind himself for Bella to stay away from the windows.

“Maybe two weeks,” the stranger replied. “Started off in Philly but decided to bug out when my neighbour ate our cat. Whatever you do, don’t head north. Half of Manhattan is lurching down the Jersey Turnpike.”

“Have you found anyone else alive?”

“Not since the third or fourth day. Some of the National Guard camps seem to have lasted a little longer but I haven’t seen any that are still operating and the radio has gone completely dead.”

“How many people do you have in there?”

“Just me and my omega. How many do you have up there? You must be busy beavers. It looks like you have half the block barricaded.”

“Just a second,” Jack called. Behind him, he could see Katz, Price and Zeller running in with the guns. Bella must have run to alert them or else Abigail, on watch up in the tower, had sent them over.

Once they were covering him, Jack leaned out the window to let the stranger see him better. “It might be easier if you come in and meet them. I promise we don’t bite.”

The stranger widened his grin even more and said, “That would be super. But I seem to be surrounded for the moment.”

“Hang on, we’ll get a ladder,” Jack called back. Turning from the window, he signalled Price and Zeller to run down to the garden and get one.

“Are you sure we can trust him?” Katz whispered, her sidearm at the ready.

“I’m sure that we can’t,” Jack said. “But if he can tell us something about the road conditions outside this neighbourhood, it’s worth taking the risk.”

When Price and Zeller returned with the ladder, Hannibal and Alana were following them.

“I think we should discuss this, Jack” Hannibal said as he directed the two agents to extend the ladder from the window to the top of the RV.

“My house, my rules, Doctor,” Jack replied turning to watch as the stranger pulled himself onto the roof and then reached back down into the skylight to pull a second figure through. Presumably this was his omega. He was much smaller than the Alpha, scrawny, bird-like and hunched over with thin black hair flying in every direction.

The Alpha whispered something in his ear and then he started reluctantly sliding along the ladder towards the window. It was barely ten feet but the omega shook so hard the ladder rattled at both ends and had to be held down by three people.

As soon as he was with arm’s reach Jack, growing impatient, grabbed the shoulder of the omega’s peacoat and hauled him through the window. The omega squeaked, rolled into a ball and then let himself be deposited in an armchair where he remained curled up and tremoring.

Alana knelt down to try to talk to him while the others went to watch the Alpha crawl along the ladder. He made much quicker work of it, waving away their arms when they offered to help and then leapt neatly through the window and onto his feet, adjusting the bottom of his suit once he was there.

“Clark Ingram,” he said, refreshing his grin and holding out his hand to no one in particular.

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After a short round of introductions, Jack led Clark and his omega, Petey, down to his dining room. He had Zeller and Price bring them some copies of local and state road maps and instructed them, along with Katz, to debrief the Alpha on as much as he could remember particularly for any potential routes out of the city.

Meanwhile he told Clark he would find him something to eat. The newcomer seemed willing to share as much as he could remember in exchange for a hot meal and his omega curled up at his feet with his face buried in his Alpha’s ankle.

Jack went back with Hannibal to the main house (Jack hated calling it that but had to acknowledge that it was where they all seemed to congregate when they had something important to discuss).

They found Bedelia sitting in the lounge reading back issues of some of the psychiatric journals Hannibal subscribed to. She had also theoretically moved into her own house, flanking the entrance to the back alley on the south side, but it was difficult to tell any difference based on how frequently she was found wandering around Hannibal's house.

"We found another survivor – well two," Jack announced moving over to stand by the fireplace mantle.

"Another Alpha and his omega," Hannibal added continuing to stand in the doorway. Of course he would refuse to sit down like a sensible person as long as there was another Alpha standing in the room. Jack had started to theorise that Hannibal had emerged fully formed from a 18th century novel instead of actually being whelped from an omega.

At least Bedelia was secure in her dynamic and remained seated although she did put the journal down and uncross her legs to make it easier to stand if she needed to.

"Yes, Bella told me when she came to fetch Zeller and Price."

"I don't know if we can trust them," Jack began.

"A complication, you'll recall, that Dr DuMaurier and I raised when you first suggested advertising our position," Hannibal interrupted.

"And I considered that point and decided that the risk was necessary," Jack finished for him. "Clark has been out there for weeks. He's a potential gold mine of information."

"If you can trust him," Bedelia added.

"What's the alternative? Sending them back out there to their deaths? Clark said he saw literally millions of infected wandering the highways... and spreading out. How long is a lone Alpha going to last in that? How much food and water can he cram into one RV - which can only keep moving as long as he can keep finding gas for it? He needs us more than we need him."

"He needs our food and water and weapons more than we need him," Hannibal clarified.

"And we outnumber him eight to one." Jack reminded himself not to start shouting again. "I like our chances."

Jack sighed and then decided to try again. "Look, we're not in a terrible position for the moment but it's untenable in the long term. We can eat through all of our food and the food in the neighbouring houses but at some point we are going to need to find more sources. We need at least four people to stand watch over the compound. That's two teams of us in twelve hour shifts plus eight hours for sleeping and eating only leaves four hours a day for us to do anything else we need to do – foraging, building up our defences, digging up the gardens to

try to grow food – strenuous work. And at the point where we've used up all the food within a four-hour search radius we're going to start really struggling. And we have absolutely no margin for error if one of us gets sick or injured. We need more people to make this work."

"People we can trust," Bedelia reiterated.

"Well fortunately, Doctor, we have at least three preeminent psychiatric experts with lots of time on their hands."

"If Dr DuMaurier, Dr Bloom and I agree to interview him and the omega, will you accept our conclusions?" Hannibal asked.

"You're the experts."

"If two of the three of us decide they go, they go." Bedelia clarified. "No questions or arguments."

"Yes, fine," Jack said starting to get impatient. "I'll invite them over for lunch, you ask them whatever you like, and then we can decide afterwards what to do with them."

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Clark seemed willing enough to be interviewed and followed Jack down the alley to Hannibal's house with Petey on a lead. The little omega obviously struggled to keep the correct pacing distance from his Alpha, wanting to curl into his side where he would feel more protected. Normally, Jack would take this poor form as a sign of incompetent handling but given the circumstances, he could understand that the omega was just badly stressed.

When they reached the dining room, he was surprised to see that Hannibal had brought his own two omegas back upstairs to eat with them. To date, the other Alpha had been over-protective to an absurd degree – lying for months about the fact that he even had omegas - although part of that was probably to cover up that they were technically underaged for private ownership. While there was no evidence that he had done anything illegal, Jack would certainly have been re-evaluating his decision to employ Dr Lecter if he had found out earlier to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.

The omegas had their puppy with them and as soon as Petey saw it he started straining forward on his lead to get a better look. Clark snapped him back but then when Dr DuMaurier suggested he let the omegas spend a little time together to see how well they were socialised, Clark unhooked the lead from his collar.

Bedelia knelt on the ground with the three omegas and the puppy in the corner while Clark sat on one side of the dining table with Dr Bloom and Dr Lecter on the other. Jack wandered back and forth listening to both conversations while Price and Zeller not very subtlely covered the exits.

"How long have you had Petey?" Dr Bloom was asking as Hannibal poured some kind of flower tea for the newcomer.

“Five years,” the Alpha responded distractedly watching the three omegas for any signs of trouble.

“No cubs yet?” Hannibal asked.

“He’s miscarried a few,” Clark responded turning back to address them directly. “To be honest, before all of this started, I was thinking about sending him back – everyone told me to - but my inner social worker finds it hard to give up on a project once I’ve started.”

“That must be so hard – losing a cub. How did it make you feel?” Alana was asking.

“Terrible. Worst days of my life. But, you know, you have to move on.”

Alana reached out across the table to try to hold the Alpha’s hands sympathetically but he jerked them away and then brightened his grin at her.

Jack drifted over to listen to the omegas. Randall and Will had been a little cautious around the new omega at first but Bedelia seemed to be smoothing things over. Petey was painfully shy, twitchy and stuttering but was very interested in the puppy.

“He looks like the one from the farm,” Petey was saying as Max started to lick his fingers.

“Did you live on a farm before?” Will asked him.

Petey looked startled, then guilty, then said, “No, we live in a townhouse too. Just a little one. We had a cat.”

“What happened to the cat?” Randall asked looking a little bored and like he would rather be napping or doing anything else.

Seeing Petey start to tear up, Bedelia intervened asking when they had visited the farm with the dog.

The omega seemed to grow even more agitated and asked her which farm she was talking about.

“Did you go to the farm before you came here?” Bedelia asked in her kindest tone.

“No, we didn’t see anyone before we came here,” Petey replied urgently before crawling over to lie down under his Alpha’s chair.

Randall shrugged at Hannibal and Jack and Will whispered something in Bedelia’s ear. She gave him a little encouraging side hug and then stood up asking Hannibal and Jack if they would help her carry in the lunch dishes.

“What do you think?” Jack asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

“He’s a psychopath,” Hannibal replied continuing to monitor the situation in the dining room through the open door. “Completely incapable of empathy or remorse. We would never be able to turn our backs on him for a second.”

“Do you concur, Doctor?” Jack asked turning to Bedelia.

“Will thinks they’re lying about not finding any other survivors,” she replied.

“Will is nine years old and an omega. I’m asking you for your professional medical opinion.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss omega instincts,” she replied. “Research has found omegas with very heightened empath...”

“I’m not interested in ‘research’, Doctor. We have to make a life or death decision here.”

“I’ve only had a five minute conversation with the omega, but I suspect that they are not being entirely forthcoming about either their experiences or their intentions.”

“So your vote is also to send them away?”

“I would like to observe the Alpha directly and hear Dr Bloom’s opinion before I cast my vote,” she responded.

They carried the dishes back to the dining table together. Clark beamed at them sunnily, obviously well aware that they had been discussing him. Dr Bloom had settled back in her chair, regarding the new Alpha frankly, and seemed to have little else she wanted to ask him.

Will and Randall came over to settle at Hannibal’s knees and he bent down to stroke their hair and give them each a kiss on the cheek. It wasn’t entirely out of place for foster-sires to show physical affection for their wards – in fact young omegas required it - but watching them together still made Jack’s skin crawl slightly for some reason.

There was an assortment of antipasto for them to assemble. Clark leaned forward eagerly scraping about half of one of the platters onto his own plate and trying everything himself before offering anything to his omega.

“This ham is amazing,” he offered as the others served themselves from what was left. “I can’t believe you still have all this stuff. We’ve been living off Doritos for a week, haven’t we Petey?”

He gave the omega at his feet a sharp nudge with his foot and the omega started and then muttered out an agreement while rubbing one of his temples against his Alpha’s calf.

“How have you been finding food?” Bedelia asked him.

“You know. Wherever we can. Who would have thought that all the rules could be thrown out the window in just a few weeks? Obviously, it’s been a struggle.”

“Not necessarily for everyone,” Dr Bloom noted. “Some people are uniquely evolved to thrive in that kind of environment.”

“What kind of people are those?” Clark responded while fishing a stuck piece of prosciutto fat out from next to one of his incisors.

“Psychopaths,” she replied without breaking eye contact with him. He paused for a fraction of a second and then grinned brilliantly at her again.

“Well, Petey and I thank you very much for this reminder of civilisation but if it’s all the same to you” he said starting to rise to his feet but then wobbling at the knees and bracing himself on the table.

“The fuck...” he said straightening himself and moving his legs to the side of the chair like they were attached to the rest of him with strings.

“That will be the flunitrazepam from your tea,” Dr Lecter told him without moving.

Clark looked directly at the psychiatrist for a split second with an unreadable expression before shoulder checking Zeller, snatching his rifle out of his hands, kicking open the patio doors and racing for the end of the garden.

Jack was after him like a shot, shouting for him to stop and put his hands in the air. Clark stumbled to the gate and, finding it was locked, turned and pointed the rifle directly at Jack.

“Don’t even think about it,” Jack told him calmly, aware that Price had stepped up behind him with his own rifle raised.

“Unlock the gate,” Clark shouted, wiping sweat out of his eyes with the hand not holding the rifle.

“You’ve only got two rounds and there’s five of us,” Jack told him. “You might be able to kill me, but I guarantee it’s not going to go well for you afterwards.”

“Unlock the gate or I swear to God I’ll kill every last one of you if I have to do it with my teeth.”

A second later Jack heard a rifle shot and, before he could duck, saw half of Clark’s head explode backwards. Clark pulled the trigger as he was falling back but the shot went high and wide, shattering Hannibal’s second story bathroom window.

Jack turned to look at Price but he looked just as surprised as Jack felt. Turning again, he could see Abigail standing in the church tower window with her rifle raised. She lowered it again and stepped back from the ledge when Jack raised his arm to signal the all clear.

Before he could gather his thoughts, however, all he could hear was the frantic screaming as Clark’s distraught omega raced out to try to get a closer look at the body. Bedelia and Alana were unable to fully restrain him but just before he reached Clark’s corpse Hannibal caught up with him and injected him with something in the meat of his thigh.

The omega dropped to his knees but continued to keen hysterically at the top of his lungs for about thirty more seconds until the rest of him collapsed.

Looking up again, Jack could see that Abigail had started shooting at something near one of the barricades. Unlocking the gate and looking out into the alley, Jack could see that the noise

from the disturbance had motivated some of the infected to start crawling under the parked cars to find its source.

Locking the gate again, Jack turned to find Hannibal hoisting the unconscious omega over one hip to carry him back into the house.

“This seems to have gone poorly,” the other Alpha offered smugly and unhelpfully.

# Reverberation

Hannibal carried the scrawny unconscious omega back into his office where, after Clark had run out of the room, he deposited Will and Randall with strict instructions to stay put. There was no time to bring them downstairs as he would have preferred.

Now the two omegas were crowded at the window staring out into the garden where Jack was frantically trying to organise the others to fight off the infected crawling under the barricade.

“Come here, pups,” he told them and was gratified to see them turn around at once and run obediently over to him, wide-eyed and looking for direction.

He dropped Petey at the foot of his desk, fished the arm restraints out of one of the drawers and fastened him to the hook under the writing surface. The omega slumped unconscious against the side of the well. It wasn’t ideal, but Petey should be out for a few hours and hopefully Hannibal would have time to move him somewhere more secure before he woke up.

Hannibal scooped Max up and then instructed his two omegas to follow him. They looked panicky but followed him quietly back down into the basement and into the safe room.

Hannibal wanted to spend more time to reassure them but knew that Jack would need his help so a quick kiss and “Everything’s going to be fine,” had to suffice.

Back in the alley, Jack and Price were trying to hold off the infected as they crawled through the barricade while Katz and Zeller raced with more furniture from the houses to lay blocking the bottoms of the cars.

“They must have some kind of hive mind,” Price was saying as Hannibal joined them. Once one of them figured out that they could crawl, the rest of them seemed to understand how as well. Or at least the ones that had been pressing against the same barricade and had seen the first one go.

“What the hell does she think she’s doing?” Jack responded.

As soon as Hannibal took his place slicing off heads, Jack took a few steps back and shouted up at the church tower, “Stop shooting! You’re just attracting more of them!”

Less than a second later, another shot shattered a rear-view mirror two feet from Price splashing broken glass at the side of his face as he bent down to plant an axe in the skull of one of the crawling infected.

“Put that goddamn gun down before I come up there and take it from you!” Jack roared before Price could say anything.

After that there were no more shots from the tower. Jack ran to help move furniture and after about twenty minutes they had the barricade reinforced and no more infected were coming

through. To be on the safe side, Jack also had them reinforce the other barricades and double check all the houses to ensure nothing had slipped through.

Once he was sure the barricades were secured, Hannibal went to check on his omegas. His heart started to race when he found they were not in the safe room... not in any of the rooms in the basement. Fighting to hold back a complete panic, he raced upstairs and felt a wave of both fury and relief wash over him when he heard the dog whimpering in his bedroom.

They were both lying on the bed facing each other with their foreheads pressed together and making noises for each other again. The dog was sitting on the floor looking up at them.

“Up, come over here,” Hannibal ordered brusquely as soon as he could stop himself from shouting. He crossed over to the closet to get his belt.

Will rolled over and around looking at him wide-eyed and not sure where he was supposed to go. Randall just curled up into a tighter ball and covered his head with his arms.

“He can’t... he’s sick again,” Will said rolling off the bed and coming over to take one of Hannibal’s hands.

Hannibal let himself be led over to the bed where Randall had started shaking and apologising over and over again.

He sat down against the headboard and dragged the older omega up into his lap, letting Will settle under one arm next to him.

“He just panicked and couldn’t stay down there,” Will explained. “And I would have come to find you but I didn’t want to leave him alone and we didn’t know where you were.”

The little omega ended sniffling with tears filling his eyes.

“Okay, pup,” Hannibal replied kissing him on top of his head and feeling some of his anger melting away.

“Sorry,” Randall added miserably a few seconds later. “His whole head... And then they just kept shooting and we didn’t know where you were.”

“That’s OK,” Hannibal said. “It’s not the sort of thing you pups should have to see or hear. I thought we had the situation under better control than that and that you weren’t in any real danger, especially with the other omega right there, but things are always unpredictable when strangers are around. I’m going to tell Jack that we can’t bring any more of them in.”

“Are the monsters still coming in?” Will asked.

“No, they’re all taken care of. You’re just as safe as you were before and there’s nothing that you pups need to worry about.”

Will leaned forward to hug his brother around the stomach and Hannibal sat still for a few moments enjoying the weight of both of them pressing into him.

“He broke the window,” Randall said finally pointing to the en suite. “There’s glass all over the floor.”

“If I clean it all up, will you take a hot bath? I think it would help you relax.”

The omega considered for a moment and then nodded, taking another deep scent from under his Alpha’s neck.

“Okay. Good boys,” Hannibal told them.

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Once he had his omegas settled again. Hannibal agreed to help Jack search the RV to ensure there was no one else left in there. Sliding across the ladder only a foot or two above the grasping hands of the tallest infected in the crowd below below them, Hannibal then dropped through the sunroof and stepped to one side so that Jack could drop down next to him.

The interior of the RV looked clean and modern, if a bit cluttered by boxes, plastic bags and suitcases. There was a strong smell of urine coming from the rear of the vehicle. Jack went forward to inspect the kitchen and then the contents of the glove box while Hannibal headed towards the back.

As he was passing down the corridor he heard some fluttering sounds behind the heavy grey curtains on his left. He grasped a kitchen knife while he lifted up a corner of the top row of curtains but then smiled and dropped his arm when he saw that it was just dozens of cages stacked on top of each other packed into the two bunk beds and filled with various small animals.

“Ha ha,” Jack called triumphantly from the front seat.

“CB radio,” he told Hannibal as the other Alpha came up behind him.

“Would it be able to transmit to the radio in the house?” Hannibal asked.

“Probably not, but the police scanner in my car will pick it up if its transmitting with a few miles I think. When we decide to get out of here, it will make it a lot easier to stay in contact between the different vehicles.”

After some more discussion, Jack backed the RV up onto the sidewalk until it was right under his window and then they lifted all of the animal cages out and into the houses along with any other useful looking supplies. When they were done, Jack pulled the RV back out onto the street just to be safe.

In Jack’s hall, they separated the animal cages into ones that would useful to keep (rabbits, chickens, guinea pigs, pigeons, turtles) and those that would not (a small racoon, rats and squirrels).

Hannibal carried the cages and tanks for the useful animals to Miss Ogle’s garage and then fed the animals. They could construct some hutches and a coop for the birds. Taking care of

them would be a good project for the omegas. Will in particular seemed to like animals and being responsible for them would encourage his nurturing instincts.

The animals that were not useful, Hannibal dispatched quickly, skinned, vacuum packed and put in the freezer.

As he was working, he could hear Petey waking up and starting to keen again under the desk in the study. Bedelia was sitting and talking with him but his crying just got louder no matter what she said.

After about fifteen minutes she came out to ask Hannibal for the keys to his restraints.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Hannibal asked. “He seems distraught and unpredictable.”

“I think it’s best to muzzle him and put him in a full restraint jacket for the time being,” Bedelia replied. “I can keep him in a quiet room at my house until he calms down a little.”

Bedelia went back to her house to get her restraints while Hannibal watched the omega and tried to stop him from banging his head repeatedly against the inside of the desk. This was easier said than done and Hannibal nearly had his fingers crushed between the omega’s surprisingly thick skull and the desk several times.

He tried to let the omega scent his wrists but this only seemed to make things worse and Petey was in full on hysterics by the time Bedelia returned.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t sedate him again?” Hannibal asked.

“No, he needs to work through this one way or the other and he can’t do that if we knock him out constantly,” she replied as she secured the muzzle around his head and unhooked his arms.

Petey tried to scramble across the floor but Hannibal was able to hold him down while Bedelia got the jacket on him. When it was secure, Hannibal took his shoulders while Bedelia took his feet and they carried him to her house, locking him in the now empty pantry with a mattress and a suspended water bottle with a soft plastic nozzle that could fit through the holes in the muzzle. After some more consideration, Bedelia added a bike helmet so he couldn’t injure himself if he kept banging his head on the wall or floor.

Back out in Bedelia’s kitchen, Hannibal asked quietly, “What do you think his chances are?”

“Very poor,” she responded. “The majority of healthy, well-adjusted omegas do not survive more than six months after the loss of their Alpha unless they have young cubs they are also tending. Petey does not seem particularly healthy or well-adjusted. But I will do my best.”

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When it was Hannibal’s turn to relieve Abigail on watch he found the young beta sitting in a dark corner of the tower. As soon as she saw Hannibal she wiped her eyes and stood up again.

“You don’t have to hide your feelings from me, Abigail,” he told her and the beta crossed the room to clasp his chest in a tight hug.

“Is Jimmy OK?” she asked after a few halting sobs.

“He’s fine,” the Alpha told her. “He’s already showing off his battle scars and asking Dr Bloom if he needs stitches.”

“Does he?”

“No,” Hannibal told her smiling and clasping her jaw briefly in both hands.

“I’m so sorry. He was pointing that gun at Jack and I didn’t know what to do and I just wanted to help.”

“You did. That Alpha was a threat to all of us and you ended that threat. That’s the only thing that’s important.”

“Is Jack mad?”

“Not at you, Abigail. When Jack’s fears overwhelm him, he lashes out – often at the ones whose help he needs the most.” Hannibal told her pulling her back into another hug against his chest.

When she had calmed down, he relaxed his arms and she pulled away slightly before coming back in on her tiptoes to plant a brushing kiss on his lower lip.

He smiled at her as she pulled away with a searching expression her face.

“What was that for?”

“You make me feel better,” she said before fleeing down the stairs.

Hannibal smiled again once she was gone. If Jack took the RV and the group did split, he would keep Abigail. She was an excellent shot and refreshingly low-maintenance and tractable compared with some of the other betas. He was reasonably sure Alana and Bedelia would not leave the omegas. If he decided he needed a larger pack, the rest of the betas would probably need some more working on. Katz could go either way; Price and Zeller would follow her like lemmings.

At least until his cub was whelped, he didn’t need betas to service him sexually, but Jack was right that the group were safer and would be more successful with more people to keep watch, clean the houses, gather supplies... if they only lost Jack and Bella and maybe a few of the betas, they should still be able to manage.

And if Abigail needed a formal bonding to tie her more closely to his pack, Hannibal was not averse. She was obviously lonely and looking for somewhere to belong. He would just need to be clear about establishing the dynamics with all of them to avoid any misunderstandings or hurt feelings.

# Perception

Chapter Notes

***Please read first***

So, um... the end of this chapter includes the extremely gross and disturbing reason why Petey is so messed up - which is related to his miscarriages. I'm a bit reluctant to just tag it because it's a spoiler, would be a super-inflammatory set of tags for a comparatively minor plot point and I'd have to explain which pregnancy/ies it relates to which would potentially cause confusion/angst about/more spoilers for the main story.

Basically, if you think pregnancy-related horror/abuse is likely to squick you out or trigger you or you suspect it's just TMI, I'd suggest bailing on this chapter at the first section break when Will falls asleep. He has a lovely dream about puppies and unicorns. See you next chapter.

You'll be able to get the drift from later plot developments. I wouldn't have included it at all if it wasn't at least kind of relevant to the main story but it's more an early clue than something you absolutely have to know about to understand what's going on.

Also happy if people want to comment on this chapter (and thanks so much for all the amazing supportive comments to date!) but please if possible when you're commenting try to work around the fact that other readers might have deliberately chosen not to go all the way through with the last part of this chapter.

Will was bored again. Hannibal had the overnight watch so he was sleeping in all morning. Randall still wouldn't really leave the bedroom and, anyway, seemed happy to snooze away twenty hours a day now. Will might not be allowed to leave the house but bedamned if he was sitting around watching everyone else lying in bed all day.

He decided to go down to the study where he could read awhile in peace. On the way down, he was surprised to see flickering lights and sound coming from the television in the lounge. There was never anything actually on TV anymore and Hannibal said they needed the electricity for more important things. Someone must be watching a video.

Walking into the lounge, Will could see Jack and Katz on one sofa and Abigail and Bedelia on another. They were watching a black and white movie of a man in a baseball cap walking down a corridor.

"Are you sure that's your father?" Jack was asking Abigail.

“You can take your time,” Bedelia reassured her. “It’s fine if you’re not sure or if you’re not ready to talk about this.”

“It’s very important that you tell us anything you can remember, though,” Jack followed up quickly. “It’s too big of a coincidence that someone was trying to break into a lab potentially researching potential biological weapons just before all of this started.”

“If we can learn some more about how everything started, maybe we can find some way out of this,” Katz added.

Abigail looked back and forth between them all seeming lost. Will was overwhelmed by her sadness and confusion. Before he knew what he was doing, he had crossed the room and sat in her lap, hugging her around the chest.

“Will,” Jack said, grasping his arm and starting to pull him away. “Now isn’t the best time.”

“It’s OK,” Abigail cut him off tightening her arms around Will. “I don’t mind if he stays.”

Looking back at the video, which was frozen on an image of the man in the hat holding a gun at the head of another man in a lab coat, she said, “He’s wearing a hat but... I think it could be him.”

Will could feel how badly she was shaking and tightened his hug slightly.

“Did he ever tell you anything about the lab? What kind of work was going on there or why he might be trying to access Dr Bevier’s samples? Did he ever talk about any friends who might be helping him or asking him for help?”

Abigail shook her head no. “I know he made some extra money selling deer carcasses whenever they did culls. He hated for anything to go to waste. I think there were a few different places he would sell them. He was trying to save money. He and my mom were in a rough patch and he thought she would take him back if he replaced some of the old or broken things around the house she was always complaining about.”

“He wanted to get a present for you,” Will said softly watching the screen and startling even himself as he spoke. He felt Abigail freeze under him.

“What was that?” Jack insisted.

“He said he wanted to get a present for me,” Abigail replied. “My father did. The day before I think. The last time I saw him.”

“Who does their Christmas shopping in a nutrition lab?” Katz asked before Jack’s look shut her down.

“How did you know that?” Abigail asked partially turning Will on her lap so he was looking at her. He shrugged sleepily.

“I think that’s enough cuddling for today,” Bedelia said lifting him off Abigail’s lap and carrying him into the study where she deposited him in a chair. “Why don’t you read in here

for a little while, sweetheart?"

Once Bedelia was gone, Will was dying to get back up and eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation in the lounge but he had been more or less ordered by the Alpha to stay in the study and didn't want her, or Jack, getting angry with him and telling Hannibal. He cracked open the closest door, however, trying to see what he could hear from the other side of the hall.

It wasn't much and after a few minutes he was bored again and started scanning the book spines for something Hannibal wouldn't normally let him read but that he wouldn't be in too much trouble if he was caught with.

Bedelia came back in just as he was settling into The Science of Evil. As soon as he heard the door open, he shoved the book into the top drawer of Hannibal's desk and tried to look innocent.

The Alpha didn't seem angry though - she just signalled for him to come over and sit in the seat across from her.

"Thank you for helping Abigail," Bedelia told him as he sat on the edge of the armchair. "She was very nervous about watching the video and I think she felt better with you there."

"She's still sad though." Will picked at the lining of the chair cushion to avoid looking directly at the Alpha. He wondered briefly if Hannibal would be annoyed that she was sitting in his seat.

"I was wondering if you could do me a favour, Will." Her tone was unreadable.

"What's that?"

"You know I'm taking care of Petey while he recovers?"

"Yes."

"He's very sad too about losing his Alpha. And it's hard for him to talk to me about it right now. But I thought maybe he would talk to you."

"Why would he talk to me?" Will didn't mind and didn't have anything else to do with his morning but wondered why the Alpha had such a strange energy about asking him.

"Because you're both omegas and because I think you're very good at knowing how to talk to people when they need help."

Will blushed a little at the compliment and then nodded hesitantly in agreement. Bedelia took his hand and led him into the dining room. He stopped when they reached the garden door, looking up at her and saying, "Is he outside?"

"He's at my house."

"I'm not allowed to go outside."

“Hannibal won’t mind as long as you’re with me. And it’s only for a few minutes.”

Will shifted from one foot to the other looking from the door up to Bedelia and back. “I’m not allowed to.”

“OK,” she said after a moment. “I’ll bring him over here.”

Bedelia returned about ten minutes later carrying Petey by the handle in a muzzle and a full restraint vest. She set him down kneeling next to one of the dining room chairs and then asked Will if they had any omega snacks she could give him. He hadn’t been able to eat anything since the few bites at lunch the day before.

Will dashed into the kitchen to check the fridge. There was a shelf full of better omega snacks like chocolates that Hannibal used for training but it was in one of the highest cupboards and they definitely didn’t have permission to go in there without asking first.

Hannibal also kept a drawer in the fridge that they were allowed to go in any time if they were hungry and he was asleep or wasn’t around to ask. At the moment there were packets of raisins, pretzels, hard boiled pigeon eggs and some juice boxes from the FEMA supplies.

Will grabbed two handfuls of the snacks and brought them back to Bedelia who had taken Petey’s muzzle off and tied his lead to the bottom of the table. Petey slumped against one of the table legs looking at the floor despondently.

Will knelt down on the other side of Bedelia and said, “Hi, Petey.”

The other omega didn’t even seem to know he was there.

“You must be hungry,” Bedelia said opening a bag of pretzels and offering Petey one. He gave a minute “no” shake with his head so she offered it to Will instead. He leaned forward to take it out of her hands trying both to show how delicious it was for Petey’s benefit and to avoid expressing the slight discomfort he felt. He’d never been hand fed by an Alpha other than Hannibal.

She offered Petey another pretzel but he looked at her like she was trying to force feed him rat poison so Will got that one as well.

He didn’t have any idea what to say. All he could sense from the other omega was waves of crushing grief with brief spikes of terror. He didn’t have any idea how to make that better.

He looked up at Bedelia for guidance, about to give up, when she gave him an encouraging stroke through the hair and he had an idea. Rising to his feet, Will ran up to the bedroom to get Max who was still sleeping at the foot of the bed. Hannibal and his brother were still out like lights when he lifted the puppy and carried him back downstairs keeping a finger pressed to his muzzle so he wouldn’t wake them up.

He didn’t quite get the reaction he was expecting when he set the puppy down in front of Petey. The other omega became a bit more lively but seemed more anxious than interested in playing.

“What’s wrong sweetheart?” Bedelia asked him in her mellowest tone. “Maybe we can help.”

“B-b-b-bus,” he stuttered more like a hiccup than a conscious communication.

Will suddenly felt a wave of concern and guilt from the other omega.

“Are you worried about the animals?” Will asked him. Petey started nodding his head so fast against the table leg Will was worried he would scratch some hair off.

“They’re fine. My... my foster-sire got them out and we fed all of them yesterday and again this morning. He said my brother and I could take care of them for you until you feel better.” This wasn’t strictly true. Hannibal had actually said they were Will’s to take care of from now on but he didn’t get the sense that would be helpful to mention. And as thrilled as he had been to have more pets, he didn’t want to take them away from their real owner.

“Can I see them?” Petey asked with some hesitation.

“When you finish your breakfast,” Bedelia told him holding down another pretzel in one hand and a juice box with a straw inserted in the other.

Petey took a quick sip of juice and then started a lengthy explanation of the names of each animal and their dietary and other care requirements. He only paused when Will asked questions and Bedelia would take the opportunity to give him some more food. He was reasonably willing to eat everything offered to him except the eggs which filled him with so much revulsion just to look at Will started feeling queasy as well.

When Petey had finished eating the other snacks, Bedelia stood to get something more substantial for him from the kitchen. But just at that moment, Hannibal walked in wearing his pyjamas with his hair still mussed from sleeping.

He and Bedelia greeted each other while Will scrambled to his feet suddenly feeling guilty again.

“Come here, Will,” Hannibal told him and the omega hurried over to his side. “Are you OK? You look a little flushed.”

Hannibal felt his forehead while he assured the Alpha he was fine.

“Will and I were just talking to Petey about how best to take care of his animals,” Bedelia explained pointing to the other omega who was hiding under the table.

“I see,” Hannibal replied and Will detected the slightest edge to his reply. It didn’t surprise him that the Alpha’s next instructions were for him to go play upstairs while he discussed something with Bedelia.

As soon as he was out of Hannibal’s line of sight, he belted up the stairs, into the music room and knelt down with his ear to the floor register that was located closest to the ceiling fan over Hannibal’s desk in the study.

A few second later he could just start to make out their conversation.

“I’m sorry for not making my expectations clearer,” Hannibal was saying, “but I assumed it went without saying that I don’t want my omegas interacting with strangers without my permission and supervision.”

“It was not my intention to go behind your back,” Bedelia replied evenly. “However, I was concerned about a patient in critical condition who was non-responsive and would not eat. I suddenly saw an opportunity to draw him out. I assure you that Will was never in any danger – the other omega is fully restrained. And Will was enormously helpful.”

“In what sense?”

There was a brief pause before Bedelia continued. “What he has is pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine.”

“Dr DuMaurier... I’m surprised to find a therapist of your qualifications and experience subscribing to a theory like ‘pure empathy’. Next you’ll be telling me that Randall has telekinesis or that Jack can see ghosts.”

“While the theory may be outside the mainstream, I have personally witnessed breakthroughs achieved using therapy omegas that I would struggle to explain in any other way.”

“Well, I don’t consent to Will being used for this purpose, regardless of his abilities.”

“I understand that you want to protect your omegas but locking them away in a room and denying them the ability to use their natural talents will end badly for them - for all of you. You can’t protect them from who they actually are.”

“I’ve said everything I intend to say on the subject,” Hannibal said curtly. “In the future, please do not address my omegas when I am not present and I would appreciate it if you would have the courtesy not to enter my home without my knowledge and permission. Now that we have the space again, perhaps it is time to reinstitute some essential social conventions.”

Sensing that the conversation was about to end and that Hannibal might come up again at any moment to check on him. Will padded carefully and as quietly as he could back to the master bedroom and crawled into bed next to his brother.

He only intended to pretend to be asleep in case Hannibal was coming up to lecture him but even though it was barely lunchtime as soon as he was curled up in the warm bed listening to Randall’s breathing, Will realised that he was absolutely exhausted.

His mind was spinning but instead of being able to sort through any thoughts in an orderly way he just found himself sinking into unconsciousness.

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He was strapped down completely to some kind of angled table with his legs up in stirrups. An Alpha wearing a surgical mask swam in and out of the edges of his vision. They were in

the basement. The walls were all three-foot-thick concrete. He had learned the first few times that no matter how hard he screamed nobody would hear him.

He was aware that someone was making a noise like a pig straining to escape its slaughter pen. He had a sense that it was probably him but couldn't find the part of his mind or body that was generating it.

"Petey, Petey, Petey," the Alpha was saying in a voice that sent chills up his spine. "I'm very disappointed that we're back here again."

Shame flooded his system overwhelming his ability even to feel pain or fear.

"I've told you again and again what I expect. I do my part. I work hard at it too. You know the calibre of progeny that is worthy of me, don't you?"

"Yes, Alpha," his voice scratched out, more from force of habit than any conscious effort.

"Is this it?" the Alpha demanded shoving a clipboard in front of his face. It was some kind of test results but the only word that registered was "omega".

"No, Alpha," he replied. "I'll try again. But please, please..."

"You will try again," the Alpha told him. "And next time you're going to get it right. Do you think I enjoy eating castoffs any more than you do? But I'm not letting all that hard work go to waste. If you don't like it, start putting a little more effort into meeting my expectations."

The Alpha swam out of view and he could hear a machine starting to whirr up. He thrashed back and forth on the table so hard he thought his joints might pop out of their sockets but...

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Hannibal had lifted him up and enclosed him against his chest with one hand pinning his neck against the Alpha's shoulder. He could flap his arms and legs around a little but not enough to get any traction. He was soaked in sweat and realised from the raw scratching in his throat that he had been screaming in his sleep. Randall was on his hands and knees on the opposite corner of the bed looking petrified and almost snarling with shock.

"I'm gon... sick," Will spouted renewing his struggling.

Hannibal stood up swiftly and dashed with him into the bathroom. They made it to the sink milliseconds before Will spewed up the entire contents of his digestive tract. Hannibal ran the faucet to keep the sink clear, splashed some of the cool water against his forehead and rubbed his back to reassure him.

When his stomach finally settled, he collapsed back into the Alpha who sat on the edge of the bathtub with Will in his lap.

"Did you have a bad dream, pup?" Hannibal was asking him stroking his hair back and rubbing his belly now. He felt his forehead again to make sure he didn't have a fever.

Will nodded, still trembling.

“Can you remember what it was about?”

He couldn’t and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. He had barely understood what was going on while it was still happening. All he was left with was the emotions – shame, terror, helplessness and nausea sinking into his bones.

“Something about eating something bad,” he mumbled and then buried himself back in the Alpha’s chest where everything was safe.

# Expedition

“There’s 620,961 people in the city of Baltimore and as far as we know 620,950 of them want to eat us.” Jack paced along one edge of the table while he spoke. The rest of the group, except for Alana and Abigail who were on watch, sat around listening intently.

“Except for the neighbours we already...” Zeller made a slicing motion across his neck.

“And anyone staying in guest accommodation,” Price added. “Although at least it was the off-season.”

“Whatever the number is,” Jack wrestled the conversation back, “I don’t like the odds of eight of us clearing the entire city out and trying to keep it secure. We have enough food for a month or so, maybe two or three with tight rationing. We still have running water but we don’t know for how much longer. If we want more supplies, we’re going to have to start going out there to get them. Or we need to try to get out of the city altogether.”

“Randall can’t travel until the cub is whelped and probably not for some time afterwards,” Hannibal stated. “Whatever you decide to do, we’re staying here.”

Jack nodded in acknowledgement.

“So what are the options? We have an RV, some cars and, for the moment, a secure compound.”

“We should go back to the lab and see if we can find any more evidence about what caused the virus,” Katz offered.

“I’d quite like to know if my brother and his family are still alive,” Price added.

“Me too,” Zeller said. “Well, not his brother, but you know...”

Jack added their suggestions to a large piece of paper on the table along with “find escape route(s)”, “try to re-establish outside communications” and “stock up on supplies.”

“We need chicken wire to build the hutches,” Randall piped up hesitantly.

“And seeds,” Bella added.

“Chicken wire... and seeds,” Jack said as he wrote, smiling at the omegas to encourage them.

“More solar panels,” Hannibal suggested. “And security cameras. We could get away with fewer people on watch if we had a surveillance system hooked up for the whole compound.”

They worked for another hour mapping out the supplies they needed and where they thought they could find them. Jack connected up a series of routes that would take them past as many locations as possible.

“Right,” he said when he was finally satisfied. “That looks like a plan. Let’s get to work”

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For the first run, Jack planned a short route that would take them past the highway offramps and then around to the railyard. They could check for supplies in the boxcars and then, if they were feeling ambitious, scout out the cruise ship terminal or the makeshift FEMA depot at Fort McHenry.

Katz’s latest theory was that the infected didn’t like sunlight, potentially because it sped up decomposition and irritated their skin. They didn’t disappear in a poof of smoke, unfortunately, but she had noticed on sunny days there were fewer wandering the streets and the ones that were out tended to stay in the shade if there was nothing actively attracting them.

So at the sunniest, brightest time of day they could find, Jack, Katz, Price and Zeller gathered their supplies, crawled into the RV and set off south.

Ignoring the decaying monstrosities shambling around him, Jack felt his heart lighten for the first time in weeks. It was a beautiful, sunny winter’s day and they were finally out of the house and doing something useful.

There were a reasonable number of cars on the roads but someone, presumably FEMA, had cleared a path wide enough to drive through. The highway off-ramps were about four blocks south of Hannibal’s house. The nearest one was blocked by a six-car pile-up but the second one had two lanes and one of them was clear.

From the top of the highway overpass, they could see fifteen or twenty blocks in each direction. Everything was eerily quiet except for the scattered bands of infected that would knock on the sides of the RV whenever they stopped. In the distance, they could see that some of the cranes at the port had been knocked sideways or burned.

There were surprisingly few cars. Jack supposed that most people had complied with the quarantine order until they fell too ill to leave their homes. Once it was clear that they weren’t recovering and that help wasn’t coming, the few people who were still healthy enough had tried to flee. Most of the cars still had infected in them, banging on the windows, not able to remember how to open the doors.

They were able to drive through to the next off-ramp and decided to get off rather than risk getting stuck at the Fort McHenry tunnel. They could already see that the traffic was much heavier ahead and suspected that at least a few lanes of the tunnel were blocked. The groups of infected also seemed to be larger and more active along that horizon.

So instead, they swung around to the cruise ship terminal. There were no ships docked, and the terminal itself was almost empty but Price suggested they check the warehouses to the east to see if there were any usable supplies. He had worked for a cruise line during his summer breaks in school, he explained, and knew that the ships stored and carried a huge amount of food.

All three of the warehouses had hundreds of pallets full of food. The perishables were well on their way to rotting but there were still dozens of pallets worth of canned goods and shelf-stable foods.

The warehouses were more or less empty of infected and easy to secure. They filled the back of the bus with as many supplies as they could, noted the location of anything else that would be useful in the future and then closed and locked the doors behind them so the infected couldn't get in later.

Jack was more than happy with their haul already and wanted to keep the first supply run reasonably short so they decided to head back. He kept his eyes peeled, however, for anything useful.

A block to the west from the cruise terminal was a yacht repair yard with a small marina. Jack could see dozens of boats, mostly recreational day fishing boats, moored along two jetties.

"If we're looking for a quick way out," he told Katz, "it might be easier to use some of those boats. No traffic to worry about and no risk of running into the infected once they were cleared."

Price groaned involuntarily and then said, "Sorry, I get seasick in the bathtub," when they all turned to look at him.

"We can just knock you out," Zeller offered. "Better a little queasy than zombie chow."

"Do any of you know how to sail?" Katz asked. They all shrugged.

"How hard can it be?" Jack replied. "It seems like the kind of thing we could learn with the proper motivation."

A few blocks later, they drove under the highway overpass, cut back the wire fencing and drove into the railyard. There were about two hundred boxcars lined up on twenty tracks. They could see some of the infected wandering around on the highway overpass above them but none on the tracks themselves.

"Stay alert," Jack told them as they started to search through and inventory the cars. They each took a can of spray paint and, after a quick look inside, sprayed a symbol for the contents on the door. "X" meant nothing usable. A circle with a line through it meant usable food. As they progressed, Katz assigned new symbols for "cleaning products", "sporting goods", "gas" and "baby furniture".

"Can you believe all this crap?" Zeller asked Price, closing the door on a shipping container full of Pokemon plushies.

"That's late stage capitalism for you..." Price told him with a shrug.

At that moment a rat ran across Zeller's foot. As he tried to step back into the air, one of his shoes caught in the coupling and he ended up falling on his back, shooting his gun in the air

and shouting “Son of a bitch. Argh!” at the top of his lungs.

Jack and Katz came running over hissing “shut up, shut up, shut up” as loudly as they dared.

“Where is it?” Jack asked as Katz gingerly tried to free Zeller’s broken leg from the coupling mechanism.

“Fuck! I don’t know. Ask Che Guevara over there.”

“It was a rat,” Price told them. “Rattus norvegicus. Not a very big one either. Probably a juvenile.”

“That’s enough,” Jack told him, signalling them all to quiet. The rattling moans of the infected had gotten louder but they seemed to all be coming from a pile up of them on the highway overpass above them.

“They can’t climb over that barrier can they?” Katz asked. It was about waist high which seemed to be holding them back for the moment but it seemed possible if enough of them crowded around, they might start pushing the front ones over it.

“Let’s not stick around and find out,” Jack said. He lifted Zeller up by the shoulders while Price grabbed his thighs and they carried him back into the RV.

They drove back to the compound with Zeller making noisy complaints about every single pothole or turn. As the road on the south side was relatively clear of infected, Jack had them clear part of the barricade so they could drive the RV into the alley and then close it back up behind them.

They carried Zeller into the basement and set him on the operating table so that Dr Bloom could examine and set his leg. She sent them out of the room while she x-rayed it. About half an hour later she came up to find them unloading the RV. She announced that he had a spiral fracture of the tibia that would require surgery to repair.

“He’s going to need to be completely immobilised for three weeks and then he’ll be in a cast for another four to six months,” she told him.

“Can Dr. Lecter help you with the surgery?”

“He could, but I’m hesitant to ask him. He’s a bit distracted at the moment.”

“With what?”

“Will has a fever.”

# Extrication

“I’m so sorry,” Katz was saying. Hannibal knew it was bad news the second he entered the lab and the three seconds it took to cross the room and for Katz to speak felt like an entire lost lifetime.

Tamping down the urge to throttle her, Hannibal asked, “What can you tell me?”

“I’m not an epidemiologist so take everything with a boatload of salt... but from the samples I collected from the infected, as near as I can tell, the infection looks like some kind of prion. Some agent causes their brain proteins to twist so they can’t receive normal nerve signals but can still send them. Whatever it is, it causes a massive immune system response with characteristic, but apparently not sufficiently effective, antibodies. Hence the fever and confusion.”

“And Will’s blood sample had these antibodies?” Hannibal supplied for her.

“Yes,” she replied looking down. “And so did Randall’s.”

Hannibal could feel his vision swim and heart pound in his throat. And then a black wave of anger and bitterness washed everything away. Of course he was never going to be allowed to experience the most basic human satisfactions for himself. There were weak, addicted, vicious, sub-moronic filthy parasites casting off offspring left and right, anywhere you look, but no amount of effort or merit on his part would ever allow him to keep a family of his own.

“Randall doesn’t have any symptoms though,” Katz was saying a hundred thousand miles away. “And all the antibodies mean is that they are fighting off some antigen or have in the past. Maybe they were successful? We don’t know whether some people have a natural immunity or not.”

Hannibal’s thoughts crashed back into the conversation. “But it is unlikely, wouldn’t you agree Dr Katz, that if natural immunity does exist the eleven people who happened to come to my dinner party would all be immune when we’ve seen hundreds of infected and only two other survivors.”

“I’m just saying we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Will has some of the symptoms but not all of them. Randall doesn’t have any. And lots of things can cause a fever. Will’s blood sample did also have some bacteria in it.”

“So what do you suggest we do next?”

“I’ll get blood samples from the rest of group and test them for the same antibodies. And I suggest assuming that Will has a normal infection and treating accordingly, since that’s all we can do for the moment. If there was no Disease X, what would you suspect he had based on his symptoms?”

“Meningitis,” Hannibal replied.

“So you do the lumbar puncture, I’ll test it and we’ll hope for the best... or you know... the less worse.”

Hannibal was still in a daze as he walked out of the lab and into their make-shift medical bay. Zeller was knocked out and in traction on the only bed, recovering from the surgery on his leg. Hannibal helped administer the anaesthesia but had to leave the rest of the procedure to Dr Bloom so he could look after Will.

He grabbed a needle, some local anaesthetic and some iodine and headed for the safe room where Will was resting with Dr Bloom. She was exhausted from the surgery and had curled up on the bed next to him with his head resting on her shoulder.

She woke up, though, when Hannibal turned the lights on and sat up to greet him. Will whimpered and curled up in a ball trying to hide his eyes from the light.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” she said feeling his forehead again as she moved off the bed. “We didn’t mean to wake you up.”

Hannibal could see from the door that there was little change in his condition – he was still flushed but pale around the edges of his face and barely responsive.

Dr Bloom came over to join him and whispered, “What were the results?”

“Dr Katz suggested a lumbar puncture to be sure. Perhaps you can assist with restraining him? I’m just concerned he might have another seizure in the middle of the procedure.”

“Yes of course. If you want I can do the puncture while you restrain him. You might have better luck.”

Hannibal considered the risk of his hands trembling and agreed with her proposal.

They rolled him to the side of the bed and then Hannibal lay down across from him and pulled him into a fetal position to extend his spine. Will started crying and protesting when Hannibal tried to pull his head down so his chin touched his chest.

“OK pup, you’ll be OK. Dr Bloom is just going to give you a little shot in your back, just like the blood test, and then you can lie down how you like again.”

Working quickly, Dr Bloom pulled his shirt up, smeared iodine around his back, administered the local anaesthetic and, after a minute or so, drew the sample of spinal fluid. Meanwhile Hannibal held the omega steady and let him scent at his neck.

“There you go,” Dr Bloom said at last. “That’s all there is to it. You did so well, Will.”

She leaned over to ruffle his damp hair while handing the sample to Hannibal.

“Can you stay with him?” Hannibal asked barely avoiding a choke in his voice. “I’ll give this to Dr Katz and then I need to check on Randall.”

“Yes, of course,” she replied curling up with Will again and offering him some electrolyte drink.

Dr Katz wasn’t in the lab. Hannibal assumed she was out collecting blood samples from the people on watch. He left the CSF sample in the centre of the workbench with a note explaining what it was.

Then he took a shower and went upstairs to check on his mate. Randall was curled up on his bed with Bella, sniffling miserably about being separated from his brother. Bella looked a little teary herself but was trying to reassure him.

“Thank you so much for your help, Bella,” he told her as she stood up. It couldn’t have been comfortable for her lying in another Alpha’s bed.

“That’s no trouble at all,” she replied as she was leaving. “Please don’t hesitate to ask if there’s anything else I can help with.”

Hannibal was relieved to find that Randall still didn’t have a fever or any other symptoms. He was distressed out of concern for Will but not otherwise unwell. He was also very clingy and almost desperate for contact. Hannibal would have mounted him (who knew when he would ever have a chance again? the darkest and most unwelcome part of his subconscious asked) except he was exhausted himself and didn’t want to be tied in case he needed to leave suddenly to look after Will.

Instead, he sat in one of the lounge chairs and pulled Randall over so he was kneeling down on a cushion between his legs. He pulled his cock out and then directed the omega to just hold it in his mouth without sucking. Randall rested his head against one thigh while Hannibal carded his fingers through his hair and told him what a perfect boy he was and that everything was going to be fine.

Gradually he could feel the omega relax against him, his breath steadying as he took in deep drafts of his Alpha’s scent. Hannibal felt himself drifting outside of time where the only things that mattered were his breath and the omega’s occasional soft, warm swallows and the motions of his breathing over and around his cock and the feeling of sinking deeper and deeper into the leather chair.

It was probably an hour or two later when he pulled himself back up. Randall was completely spaced out against his leg but otherwise seemed calm and well. Hannibal lifted him up onto the bed so he could drift off to sleep there. He felt his forehead one more time to be sure and then left to go back downstairs.

Katz was back in the lab when he returned, bent over a microscope. Price was helping her prepare and read samples and record the results.

Hannibal cleared his throat so they would know he was there.

“I don’t know if it’s good news or not, but every sample I’ve tested has been positive for antibodies for the infection. Which means we’ve all been at least exposed. Since it’s likely

been at least a month and Will is the only one who has ever shown symptoms, we might be able to assume that we've successfully fought off whatever it is out there."

"What about the results from the CSF analysis?"

"His protein levels are elevated suggesting bacterial meningitis," Katz replied and Hannibal felt something in his heart unclench for the first time in two days.

"It's probably Listeriosis from exposure to the chickens," Price added. "Or maybe the rabbits. How sanitary are any of those cages going to be?"

Hannibal was already crossing over to the cabinet where he kept his pharmaceutical supplies. It had been some time since he'd had a long-term patient and he didn't have much beyond the basics. He could write his own prescriptions but it generally wasn't worth the risk of drawing attention to himself.

He had some broad spectrum IV antibiotics he could start Will on but not really a full course if Zeller ended up needing them as well. Will would be better off with a more specialised approach anyway. Likewise, he had corticosteroids and anti-convulsants but not the ideal types and not in a quantity he was confident in.

He started Will on what he had, consulted his old medical text books to draw up a shopping list and then went to find Jack. They checked their maps to find the nearest pharmacy and then Jack, Hannibal and Price loaded their gear into the RV.

Hannibal suspected that there would be a number of infected at the pharmacy and his suspicions proved correct. They could see at least thirty of them wandering around the aisles.

Jack decided that given the odds and the time pressures, they should go in shooting. They parked the RV so that it blocked the front entrance and then climbed out the sunroof and through a second story window into the office. From there, they were able to take the infected out one by one as they were drawn to the foot of the stairs.

Once the floor of the pharmacy itself was cleared, they made their way towards the dispensary. Hannibal saw a flash of white under the counter and Jack unloaded his shotgun into a small refrigerator on the desk behind it.

"Don't shoot," they heard someone calling. "I surrender – don't shoot."

"Who's there?" Jack shouted in reply. "Stand up with your hands where I can see them."

A middle-aged man with balding hair and glasses and wearing a grubby white lab coat stood up slowly with his hands raised over his head. He was a beta but unusually tall and with a thick beefy neck.

"I'm just a pharmacist," he called. "Don't shoot."

"What's your name?" Jack said as he tried to look around the corners behind the dispensary counter. "Is there anyone else in there?"

“Eldon Stammets,” the beta replied. “It’s just me. I was the only one that turned up for work and then suddenly those things were just everywhere – all over the store and in the alley out back. They couldn’t come over the counter though so I just stayed back here.”

“How are you still alive?” Price asked.

“I’ll show you,” Stammets said. “Just let me unlock the side door for you.”

The pharmacist was gone for a second and then they heard the deadbolts being pulled back on the security door.

Coming through they could see that Stammets had smashed through the glass on all of the vending machines in the employee break room. There were also several open boxes of empty potato chips bags that he had pulled out of the back room.

“If I never see another stick of gum again it will be too soon,” he told them in an awkwardly confidential tone.

“My friend here has some supplies he needs,” Jack said once they had confirmed that Stammets was alone.

“Take whatever you want... just please don’t leave me here when you go.”

“Yes, that fine. Pack up whatever you want to take with you,” Jack replied without hesitation. Hannibal felt another twinge of annoyance but decided it was more important for the moment to get Will’s medicine.

He dumped out the contents of the cardboard boxes and started loading them up with everything vaguely useful he could find – antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, anti-convulsants, pain killers... Stammets was happy to unlock all the cupboards and point him towards whatever he wanted. The refrigerators had all gone dead weeks before but fortunately everything Hannibal needed was shelf stable.

He filled four large boxes and then signalled to Jack that they had enough for the time being. Hannibal and Price each picked up two boxes while Jack kept his gun ready. Stammets carried a paper grocery bag which he had filled with two jam jars of some kind of dried substance. Apparently, there was nothing else in the office he wanted to keep.

They went back upstairs and then out the window and back into the RV.

“What’s wrong with your friend?” Stammets asked as they were driving back. “The one you’re getting medicine for?”

“It’s his omega,” Price announced before Hannibal could stop him. “Meningitis.”

“He has a fever?” Stammets said looking like he suddenly wasn’t sure if he should get up and ask to be let off or not.

“It’s definitely meningitis. We tested him.” Price reassured him.

“Do you want me to take a look at him? I’m just a pharmacist but seeing as how you’ve saved my life, I’d be happy to do anything I can to help.”

“That’s very kind of you but unnecessary,” Hannibal replied. “A number of us have medical training.”

Stammets was quiet for another block or two, considering something. Finally he said, “If you really want to know how I survived, it’s this.”

He reached into the paper bag and pulled out a jar of dried mushrooms. “They’re reishi mushrooms. I grow them myself. They boost the immune system. I drink a tea made from them every morning. I’d be happy to make some for your omega. Or you can just have some. I don’t have a lot left though, as you can see.”

Stammets cautiously handed the jar to Hannibal who inspected it more closely. As far as he could tell, they were just dried slices of ordinary mushroom.

“You grow your own mushrooms?” Hannibal asked handing the jar back. Almost immediately he regretted the question as Stammets launched into a lengthy discussion of the merits of various kinds of compost.

After what felt like an eternity, they finally made it back to the compound. Jack took Stammets to his house where they agreed he would be quarantined until they had time to interview him. Stammets didn’t object as soon as he heard Price was going to bring him a hot meal with something other than sugar or carbs in it.

Hannibal headed downstairs with the boxes of medicine. Alana helped him set up the IV antibiotics for Will and to portion out his medications in a pill box. Will was still semi-conscious, burning up and his breathing was laboured. Alana told him he’d had another seizure while they were away.

He sat with the pup for several hours with no real change in his condition. Will had several brief convulsions where his eyes rolled back and Hannibal had to stop him from choking. Not even an ice bath would bring his temperature down for very long.

Finally, in desperation, he headed over to Jack’s to ask Stammets for some of his tea.

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Will’s brain felt spongy, like a trampoline. Things were bouncing on it all around him in the dark and he could feel tremors but couldn’t see what was causing them.

He was in the back of the van with Randall but the floors and walls and ceiling were all made of foam and they just bounced off of them as they spun around and over until he was thrown out the sliding door.

He was lying on a carpet of mushrooms and the mycelium of his thoughts stretched all the way across the floor of the forest through, over and around all the buried bones and husks and rotting things.

Even through the snow, he could feel the heavy footsteps of an Alpha and an omega and two of their cubs running through the forest and then the heavy thud of the omega's body as she fell. The desperate way she scrambled to her feet again and all but dragged the cubs after her. The footsteps pursing them.

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Will woke up with a scream caught in his throat but Hannibal was sitting right next to him to help reassure him.

"It's just a bad dream, Will," he told him. "And it's a good sign that your fever is breaking. I can't tell you how glad I am to see you back with us."

The IV in his arm pinched and itched and he wanted to take it out but Hannibal told him he needed to just ignore it for the time being.

When Will was a little more settled, Hannibal excused himself for a few minutes and then returned carrying a steaming bowl.

"Silkie chicken in a broth. A black-boned bird prized in China for its medicinal values since the seventh century. Wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise," the Alpha explained as he set up a tray over Will's lap.

"Is it chicken soup?" Will asked sniffing at it.

"Yes," Hannibal admitted after a pause.

# Ambition

A few days later, once Will was finally out of the woods and clearly starting to recover, Hannibal agreed to sit on the interview panel for Eldon Stammets.

The pharmacist had, from Jack's account, been polite and helpful - willing to stay in a locked suite of rooms at Jack's house under guard. He spent most days reading, drinking tea and enjoying meals that did not consist entirely of Cheetos.

They couldn't spare a guard much longer though. Between regular watch shifts, Zeller being in traction and the daily supply runs Jack had been leading, the Alphas and betas were all exhausted and on edge. They had visited the homes of Katz's, Price's and Zeller's families and, where they were lucky, had found no one alive. Price in particular was uncharacteristically silent and subdued after the visit to his twin brother's family's house.

They needed to make a decision about whether to put Stammets on the watch rotation or send him on his way, assuming they could trust him enough not to turn around and cause problems for them later.

So Hannibal, Bedelia and Alana sat on one side of Jack's dining room table while Stammets sat on the other.

He seemed nervous but determined not to show it – fiddling with the edge of the table cloth but looking them steadily in the eyes.

"Is your pup feeling better?" he asked Hannibal, trying to ingratiate himself with his opening gambit.

"Yes, thank you," Hannibal replied without elaborating to test his reaction.

"Have you decided what you're going to do with me?" he asked finally, growing impatient with their silence.

"I'm sure you can understand, we need to be sure about your intentions before we can agree to any kind of longer-term arrangement," Bedelia replied.

"Likewise," Stammets replied. "For example, are you planning to stay here? We would all be a lot safer if we got out of the city. My mother's farm is up near Sykesville. It might be harder to defend but there would probably be a lot fewer of those things out there too."

"We're not planning to leave, at least not in the immediate future," Hannibal replied. "But we won't stop you if that's where you would prefer to go."

"Yes," Stammets responded almost immediately. "With all due respect and appreciation for your hospitality, it's obviously unsafe here and I would prefer to check on my family. If you can give me a ride out there though, I would be happy to try to pay you back with whatever

you want, within reason. My mother keeps some livestock which may or may not still be alive and, if not, I have my mushroom patch out there if you want some more."

After a nod from the others, Alana went to find Jack and a map.

"How far away is Sykesville?" Hannibal asked when they returned.

"About thirty miles," Jack replied. "The problem is Highway 70 is just about the only way to get there and Clark told us it's swarming."

"Assuming we can trust him," Alana added.

"And the information is a few weeks old," Jack conceded. "But I can't see any benefit to him in lying about it. Where's the farm exactly?"

"By the river, here," Stammetts told him pointing it out.

"Is that the Patapsco? Is it navigable that far up?" Jack asked. "We might be better off going by boat."

Looking up to see them all staring at him questioningly he added, "There's a boat repair yard a few blocks south from here. It might be easier to get a boat from there and sail it up the river than to try to get the RV through on the road."

"Most of those boats will be for deep sea fishing or ocean cruising and won't have a shallow enough draft for the river. If we get stranded on a shoal somewhere, it's not going to be easy to get back. My family used to sail..." Bedelia explained when she realised they were all looking at her.

"Can you read navigation charts?" Jack asked her. "There must be a map somewhere that shows whether the river can be navigated that far and where the dangerous areas are."

"Yes, probably," Bedelia replied. "We mostly sailed in the bay and on the open ocean though, not up the rivers."

"OK," Jack said settling into the plan in his mind. "Dr DuMaurier can come with me this afternoon to the boat yard. We'll try to find some navigation charts and a boat with a shallow enough draft. If we can find something, we'll take you up to the farm Eldon and you can decide if you want to risk staying there or not. From memory, there's a shooting range up in Sykesville anyway. It would be worth checking to see if anyone has scavenged there already or not. And we can try to get some of the gardening supplies off Bella's list."

Since his services were no longer required, Hannibal decided to head home and check on his omegas.

For a change, Will was resting quietly in one of the guest bedrooms reading a book just where Hannibal had left him and Randall was nowhere to be seen. He had given them the run of the house again as long as they didn't go outside but searching through all of the upstairs rooms without finding his mate, Hannibal was beginning to feel a clenching in his chest.

Standing in the dining room he could hear very faint popping sounds beneath his feet. Abigail had asked for permission to set up a target range in the basement because the soundproofing meant they could practice shooting without attracting the infected. She must be down there now.

She'd draped a red shirt over the trap door which was supposed to signal that the range was live and that nobody else should go down in the basement. The only way to get enough distance was to set the targets up on one end of the corridor and shoot from the other and Jack insisted that the whole basement be cleared before the range was used to avoid any accidents.

Hannibal decided to go down anyway to ask Abigail if she had seen Randall anywhere.

In turned out he didn't have to. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he found that Abigail was teaching his omega how to shoot, her hands adjusting both of his shoulders and her forearms dropping across his shoulders while she praised him.

The wave of rage that crashed through him was so strong it blurred his vision and it took him several moments to steady himself. He couldn't even have said who he was angrier with.

It took them about the same amount of time to notice he was there. Randall got a bullseye, Abigail was shaking his shoulders in congratulations, the omega looked up smiling at Hannibal as if expecting approval, saw the look on his Alpha's face and then ducked his head.

Hannibal just managed to avoid clearing his throat before saying, "Randall, go upstairs and wait in my study."

The omega turned bright red and seemed to have tears welling up in his eyes as he mumbled, "You didn't say not to" into the floor.

"He's just trying to help," Abigail said at the same time not quite managing to look Hannibal in the eye but managing a fairly defiant stare at his tie.

"Upstairs," Hannibal repeated and the omega immediately folded and went, handing the gun back to Abigail.

When he was sure Randall was out of earshot, he turned back to address the beta who was looking a little less sure of herself now that she was on her own. He would need to handle this carefully to avoid undermining the work he'd managed to do with her so far.

"Put the gun down, please, Abigail," he started and was gratified to see that she obeyed almost automatically.

"You obviously have some very valuable skills for our group and I appreciate that you are taking the time to share those skills with some of the others and to befriend my omegas but Randall..."

"He just wants to be able to protect himself and Will. We all know that we're short on people to cover the watch posts. All we do is sit up there and ring the alarm if we see anything. It's

not that much more dangerous than sitting around and doing nothing two houses away."

The full absurdity of what she was saying took a few moments to sink in.

"Abigail... you're not an Alpha so perhaps this is difficult for you to understand... but there are no conceivable circumstances under which I would allow my bred omega mate to sit fifteen feet away from a zombie horde – gun or no gun, training or no training, barricades or no barricades. Quite apart from that Randall has an anxiety disorder and is under strict medical instructions to avoid exposure to stressful situations."

"But don't you think he would have less anxiety if he knew how to defend himself?"

Discarding his first three or four harsher responses, Hannibal settled on gathering the beta in his arms and saying, "I appreciate the concern, Abigail, I do, but I am responsible for my omegas' wellbeing, not you. In the future, if you want to teach them something or if they ask you to teach them something that might put them in harm's way I expect you to come and ask my permission first. Understand?"

"Yes, Alpha" she replied looking down to the floor.

He risked a "Good girl," and a brief kiss with closed lips which she responded to flawlessly.

In the study, Hannibal saw that Randall had put himself in a corner – probably to stay as far from the central desk as possible while still technically complying with instructions. He was pretending to examine a display case of butterflies on the wall.

Hannibal walked over and took his seat, signalling the omega to come over and sit in his lap. He smiled when Randall obeyed and gave his mate a hug and a kiss on the temple to reassure him when he felt how much the omega was trembling.

"Why do want to learn how to shoot?" Hannibal asked him. "Don't you know your Alpha will always take care of you?"

"Yes," Randall responded hesitantly, "but... sometimes you're not here."

Hannibal turned the omega's head so he was looking directly into his eyes. Randall shifted uncomfortably, afraid to meet the Alpha's intense expression.

"If you or your brother are ever in any danger, I will be there. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Alpha," the pup said looking down again. He had relaxed a little but not completely.

"But..." Hannibal prompted him.

"I just wanted to do something useful."

"You are doing something useful," Hannibal told him wrapping both arms around the omega's swelling stomach and kissing his mating mark. "Unquestionably more useful than any of the rest of us."

“I just sleep all day and get in the way. I know we’d be better off if we could leave...”

“You don’t know that pup,” Hannibal told him with another kiss. “Nobody knows where we would be better off. But we’re working it out. Even if you were able to travel, we would likely still be staying here because all of our supplies are here and it’s the most secure place we know about.”

“Can’t I help with something though? I mean really help?”

“Yes. You can help by being where I expect you to be and obeying me at once when I ask you to do something. I’ve told you before that stalling and talking back when I tell you to do something is unacceptable behaviour.”

“Yes, Alpha,” the omega responded hanging his head again. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay, pup. Let’s take care of it. Bend over the desk please.”

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Eldon Stammets joined them for dinner in the main house that evening for the first time. It was also the first time that week that Will was well enough to come downstairs and eat with the rest of them although Hannibal did allow him to slump against his leg and rest his chin on the Alpha’s thigh in a way that he would not otherwise be allowed in front of company.

Hannibal did regret indulging him a little because as soon as Randall saw his brother getting away with being clingy and moping, he was inclined to try the same. But the Alpha was less sympathetic to Randall’s self-induced sore backside than he was to Will recovering his strength and told the older omega to sit up and behave himself.

He could swear he saw the pup starting to sulk but was distracted by Jack and Bedelia discussing the news from the trip to the repair yard that afternoon. Bedelia had examined the charts and considered that it was possible to navigate up the river as far as the Stammets farm. Unfortunately, there was only one boat at the yard with a shallow enough draft and it was there for engine repairs.

“The records say the engine has a cracked cylinder head which they hadn’t gotten around to repairing yet,” Bedelia explained showing them the file. “Unfortunately, I don’t know enough to say how serious that is or how to fix it.”

“I can probably fix it,” Randall said standing up so he could look over her shoulder at the file. “If the crack’s not that big you just need epoxy and a stitching kit.”

That’s as far as he got before Hannibal snapped twice at him to signal him to kneel back down again. The pup went wide-eyed in surprise but sank down immediately. Then he realised that he was kneeling for Bedelia by mistake and shifted over until he was back in position next to Hannibal again.

“How do you know about engines, sweetheart?” Bedelia asked to cut through the tension.

Will answered because his brother was blinking back tears. “Our sire used to repair boat engines for a living and he taught Randall how to do it. He would take him along on jobs all the time.” Then, looking up at their Alpha, “Randall can fix anything.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Hannibal said reaching down to pet both of them for reassurance. He could see how embarrassed and frustrated the older omega was at being reprimanded in front of the others. “I suppose if there’s some way to bring the engine here and to check that none of the chemicals needed are potentially harmful for the cub...”

“I don’t think there’s any way to bring the engine here,” Bedelia said. “It’s three times the size of a car engine and bolted into the boat. Even if we had a truck big enough to haul it and a winch to move it, I wouldn’t know where to start detaching it. If all you need to do is essentially glue up some cracks, it must be a lot easier to just bring Randall there...”

“Absolutely not,” Hannibal cut her off. “I’m sorry but no. Not under any circumstances.”

“Well, does anyone else know anything about engines?”

Looking around the table, they all shook their heads no.

“Can you just explain to us how to fix it, Randall?” Bedelia asked.

He shook his head no and then Hannibal lifted him up so he was sitting in his lap and could look at the rest of the group directly.

“How you do it depends on how big the crack is and on what part of the cylinder head. And you have to check the rest of the engine to see what caused the crack in the first place.” The pup was a bit shy now.

“This yard can’t be the only place to get a boat in Baltimore,” Hannibal offered.

“It’s the only one four blocks away that we already know is clear of infected,” Jack responded. “The next closest marina is thirty or forty blocks past God knows what and we’d have to clear the marina itself. Who knows how many people were staying on their boats when the quarantine started? And we’d have to find a way to barricade the marina while the boatyard is already fenced off. It’s not impossible, it’s just a lot more work.”

“Well, I’m afraid that’s what we’re going to have to do,” Hannibal said finally lifting Randall up until he was kneeling back beside him again. He could see from the resentful set of the omega’s shoulders and the way he paused for long periods before accepting more food that they were going to be having another talk in the study, sooner rather than later.

He was going to have to find more things to keep the pups occupied with when he was sleeping or on watch. It was a shame they weren’t better equipped to entertain themselves appropriately like Bella was but he supposed that was the job he had taken on by choosing untrained omegas in the first place.

Like Bedelia said, their energy, enthusiasm and curiosity were evolutionary strategies intended to help them adapt and assimilate successfully into their Alpha’s home. He just

needed to make sure he was doing his job - steering it all in the right direction.

# Navigation

One month in to the Jägerbomb hangover that never ended, Bev dragged her exhausted ass out of bed. She'd had three hours sleep after standing watch all night but it's not like she could complain to Jack, who'd had none.

As pointless as it was to take a shower, wash her hair, put on moisturiser, and dress in something other than sweatpants, she did it anyway. It was all just going to get covered in zombie-goo anyway but her mother and two sisters, whom she had decapitated with a sword only last week, could take some comfort in the fact that at least she was keeping herself presentable.

And it felt like as long as she could hold this one thing together, she could hold everything else together too. It just took one little motion after another after another until it was finally time to sleep again. Brush teeth, spit, pee, deodorant, find Jack.

Today Jack wanted to storm a marina, steal a boat, learn how to sail it and escort Opie the pharmacist upriver to Nowhere, Zombieland. So that's what they were going to do. Because the alternative - sitting around and thinking about things - was a lot worse.

She went downstairs and grabbed some croissants and coffee. Force of habit brought her into the TV room even though nothing had been on for weeks. For some reason, she couldn't kick the feeling that if she turned it on, the morning news would just be there. Traffic and weather at the top of the hour.

Instead, she found Jack showing Randall how to boost the signal for the police scanner. They weren't sure about the range but it was better than nothing. Best case scenario they'd still be able to call for help if they ran into trouble at the marina. Not that there was much of a cavalry left to call.

Tuned to the right channel, they could hear Price singing "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" into the CB radio in the RV.

Jack and Randall grinned at each other and Jack tousled the omega's hair as he stood up again. Hannibal, also standing in the doorway watching them, looked like he would happily fillet someone.

Heading off the first knot-measuring contest of the morning, Bev asked if anyone had seen Bedelia or Stammets. According to Jack, they were both already waiting in the RV.

Downing the last of her coffee and grabbing her shotgun from the closet, Bev was ready to face the day or at least start plowing her way through it.

She followed Jack back to his house where he said goodbye to Bella and then they crawled over the ladder, through the sunroof and into the RV. It was Bev, Jack, Stammets, Bedelia and Abigail along for the trip. She would have rather had Price at her back but he insisted he got violently seasick so they'd substituted the serial killer's daughter instead.

Not that Bev thought the parent's crimes should be held against their kids. And at least she was a good shot and didn't try to cover up her nerves with bad puns or show tunes. But something about an eighteen year old being so completely self-possessed set off Bev's spidey senses.

It was a bright and sunny winter's morning but it had snowed a few inches the night before and, with no one to plow the roads, Jack drove even more like a grandma than usual.

The closer they got to the water, the larger the groups of infected grew – from a few stragglers, to occasional small groups to groups large enough to make them turn around and try a different street. Bev suspected that the explosion at the port had attracted a number of them and they hadn't found either a reason or means to disperse. A number were also wearing fatigues and had probably been part of the relief effort before they turned.

It took about an hour and a half to drive thirty blocks to the marina. The highway was absolutely crawling but there was no way around it. They had to wait for a thinner gap between groups and then plow through to the other side.

Bev still winced as she heard and felt bodies being crushed under the wheels of the RV. She knew that they weren't really alive but she found it hard to switch off the part of her brain that still recognised them as people.

Then they lurched again as Jack jumped the curb onto the brick pavers and started winding around the apartments blocks to get to the marina.

There was a long trail of infected following them now, diverted from the highway by the noise and motion. It would be difficult to double back and they would probably have to wait for the crowd to disperse before they could get the RV out again.

Fortunately, most of the marina could only be accessed from a central pier and the RV was wide enough to block the pier if they drove up to it sideways. That at least meant they didn't have to worry about the infected on shore while they took out anything living on the boats.

They jumped out of the door of the RV and onto the pier. There were about two hundred boats moored there but most were small recreational fishing boats and they wanted something a little bigger so they could haul things back. The larger boats were moored to floating decks at the end of the pier.

And it looked like the thirty or so people who had been living on their boats when the quarantine hit had taken shelter in the bar at the end of the pier. It was tiki themed with a wooden railing around the open second floor where they could see a crowd of the infected starting to shamble down the ramp towards them.

Jack shouted for them to stay together as he started to jog towards the bottom of the ramp. If they could get there quickly enough they could cut them off and only have to deal with a few at a time. And hopefully more wouldn't also start coming at them from the various floating piers attached to the fixed one.

Unfortunately, the pier was too long to get to the base of the ramp before infected started pouring off it and spreading across the width of it to surround them.

Bev and Jack slashed with the katanas in their right hands and then started shooting with the shotguns in their left when it was clear that the numbers were overwhelming. They could hear Abigail, Stammets and Bedelia starting to shoot as well.

The stench was appalling and gore flew in every direction. At one point Bev could barely see between the reflection of the sun on the water, the sweat and who knew what else dripping into her eyes and the stress-induced tunnel vision.

One thing at a time, she told herself. This one's neck is exposed. Slash. That one's about to grab Jack. Pull trigger. Duck. Thrust into stomach. Pull the blade free. Wipe crap out of eyes. Don't trip over that body. Shoot that little one before he can flank Abigail.

She wasn't even aiming but somehow they seemed to be dropping... like all she had to do was point her fingers at them and they would fall over. Some kept reaching up and trying to bite or trip her but they stilled after head or heart shots.

Several times they were almost overwhelmed but Jack refused to order them to fall back and until he did, Bev was going to keep hacking and blasting away.

Finally, there didn't seem to be any more coming at them. Looking around she could see that the noise had attracted a few more infected out onto the decks of the boats but they didn't seem to be able to get themselves over and onto the piers. She could also hear the pounding on the side of the RV from landside infected and there was a very faint rocking motion but nothing to suggest that they might be able to tip it over.

They split up to inspect the boats and take out any of the remaining infected on them. It took the better part of an hour for Bedelia to settle on the one she wanted and for them to clear the rest of the marina.

Meanwhile Bev raided the bar and loaded cases of liquor into the RV. She used some of the cleaner looking snow to make something approximating margaritas and brought them out for everyone except Bedelia, their designated driver.

When the therapist was finally satisfied that there was enough fuel, she knew how to use the controls and she had the right charts, she signalled that they were ready to go.

Bev's low grade sleep deprivation headache was turning into a full scale migraine so as soon as the boat left the dock and they'd had a quick lunch, she went down to the cabin to sleep on the pleather cushions.

The water was a little choppy at first but gradually she drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

It was mid-afternoon when she woke up. Abigail and Jack had had the same idea and were sleeping on other parts of the same bench.

Back up on the deck, she could see that they were making steady progress up the river, which was only about three or four times as wide as the boat itself. There were railroad tracks along the north bank and they were surrounded by naked oak and hickory trees but there were no other signs of life (or unlife, thankfully).

Upstairs she found Stammets and Bedelia trying to work out how much further it was.

“How long have I been out?” Bev asked.

“About three hours,” Bedelia replied. “I think we’re almost there.”

“We should stop just after this oxbow,” Stammets told them pointing to the chart. That’s the closest that the river comes to our farm. From here, it’s just a ten minute walk through the woods to the nearest barn.”

At least with all the trees dead or dormant, the visibility would be decent but it also meant that anything out there would have a pretty good view of them too. Bev had never been a huge fan of the great outdoors and suspected that this trip wasn’t going to be the one to turn it all around.

She went back downstairs to wake up Jack and Abigail. She was starving again, even though it was only about three thirty. She ate the dinner she had packed hoping that they would be able to find something else edible at the farmhouse.

“We’re going to have to spend the night,” Jack decided. “Sunset’s in two hours and Bedelia won’t be able to navigate in the dark.”

They dropped anchor where Stammets had indicated. They couldn’t get close enough to the bank to use the ramp so they had to wade in waist deep water to get to land. The current was slow but the water was freezing cold. Despite how uninviting the woods looked, Bev couldn’t help wishing they would hurry up and get inside so she could change out of her wet jeans into anything else.

Bedelia stayed behind to guard the boat but the rest of them jogged through the woods following Stammets until they came to an open pasture in front of a barn. There were half a dozen infected clawing at the doors but they were able to take them out using only the katana.

Inside they could hear the pathetic bleating that had attracted them. A few grown goats and half a dozen kids had busted out of their pens and had been gorging themselves on the hay in the loft and anything else they could find.

They refilled the water troughs but let the goats keep the run of the barn, securing the door behind them and setting up some sharpened stakes to keep more infected away from it. At least the whole trip wouldn’t be a total bust if they could get some of them back to the boat with them.

A little further up the road was a piggery but the infected has busted into it and slaughtered everything.

And then at the top of the hill was the farmhouse itself. It looked creepy and haunted but also not exposed to the wind that had been eating through Bev's lower legs for the last half hour and therefore it was the most beautiful structure she had ever seen.

She ran on numb feet up to the front door which was wide open and flapping. Stammets called for his mother but there was no reply. They searched every room in the house but there was no sign of the old broad.

Stammets got a fire started in the potbelly stove and they all crowded around it to dry off. He also started boiling some water in a kettle for his diabolical smelling fungus tea. That was Bev's cue to start searching through the closets for some blankets they could wrap themselves in.

Once the pins and needles in her legs calmed down, Bev dug around a little and found a full pantry of food but no signs of where Mrs Stammets had disappeared to. There was an ancient truck with half a tank of gas in the driveway at least so they might be able to do some exploring in the morning before they had to come back.

Looking up from the driveway, she saw Stammets walking back to the house. In each hand he held a dead chicken by its recently wrung neck.

"There's a dozen or so more left in the coop over there," he told her pointing over behind the garage with his chin. "These were the scrawniest two so we might as well have them tonight."

Their dinner of boiled chicken, canned green beans and peaches might not have been entirely up to Hannibal's standards but it went a long way towards helping Bev recover her spirits. So far they hadn't seen any infected except for the ones at the barn but that didn't mean there weren't more out there. They were a lot more exposed here than they were at Hannibal's and it wouldn't take a lot of infected to knock down a termite-infested wall in this shack.

When they had finished eating, Jack took Bev aside and explained that in the morning he wanted to take Abigail to find the shooting range and feed store while Katz should stay with Stammets and pack up everything for them to bring back. Stammets had offered them half of whatever food was left at the farm in exchange for protection on the trip out so that netted them half a dozen chickens, a couple goats and a few boxes of canned veggies. Mostly, however, her instructions were to babysit Stammets until Jack could get back.

She wanted to object. The shooting range sounded like a lot more fun. But she understood why Jack didn't trust Abigail alone with the pharmacist. He was easily twice her size and, while neither of them had specifically done anything to raise suspicions, neither of them were part of their BAU crew either.

Bev lucked out and drew the first watch which meant she got an uninterrupted six hours for the rest of the night. Not even crashing on a dusty granny sofa that smelled like cough drops could keep her from her date with oblivion.

And, miracle of miracles, it was a quiet night and she woke up to the smell of fresh biscuits filling the house. They were so amazing, Bev didn't even think twice about chasing them

down with goat's milk and the juice from a can of mandarin oranges. If she squinted her taste buds, it was almost a normal-person breakfast.

After Jack and Abigail left, Bev and Stammets carried a stack of wire cages out to the chicken coop. There were twelve chickens left which meant Bev had to cage six of them. Stammets left her to it, saying that he would pack up the boxes of food in the house and anything else that might be useful for them and that he didn't need. He slapped the side of the coop as he was leaving which woke all the chickens up and set them fluttering and squawking out into the run.

For a flock of half-starved poultry, they could still run pretty fast and kick up a hell of a fuss when she did manage to grab one of them. She wanted one of the two roosters because they didn't have one in Petey's flock and it was likely at some point they would want to grow it. But even the smaller rooster was evasive. At least until she cornered it and it decided it had had enough launching at her calf with its full force and furry.

"Die, motherfucker!" she screamed at it as it tore into her leg and then blew past her back into the coop.

Looking down she could see that its claws had torn through her jeans and its spurs had punctured her right calf in three different places. She slammed the door of the coop shut so that at least the little hellspawn was trapped inside and then limped back to the house so she could clean and bandage her wounds.

She called out for Stammets to ask him where the antibacterial cream was but there was no reply. Looking around she noticed a trail of footprints in the snow leading from the back porch to the woodline.

That's not suspicious at all, she told herself, drawing her gun and following the trail.

She caught up with him about fifteen minutes later in a thicket where he was kneeling over a large field of amber coloured seashell shaped mushrooms poking up through the snow.

She let her gun drop slightly but then raised it again when she noticed the long row of human arms extending upwards from the field and held up by what looked like rebar and plastic tubing.

Stammets stood up smiling at her as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He had a basket half full of mushrooms in one hand and a small curved harvesting knife in the other.

"I was just getting a basket for you to take home... a kind of thank you," he told her mildly without pausing and starting to step towards her.

"Don't move," Bev shouted out at him. "Take one more step and I'll shoot."

"You have no idea how valuable they really are. If you walk through a field of mycelium they know you are there. The spores reach for you as you walk by."

"Well, let's all keep our spores to ourselves and nobody will get hurt."

Don’t make me shoot you, you wall-eyed creep, Bev said desperately to herself. Don’t make me pop my lethal force cherry with Opie.

“You haven’t understood at all,” he said. “Connection is the key to our survival. They’re reaching out for us now so that we can reach out to each other. They saved me so that I can save you.”

He took another step closer, dropping the basket but not the knife.

“Take one more step and you’re not going to like how we connect,” she said taking a step back in turn.

She spooked herself by backing into a tree trunk and then Stammets lunged and then she shot him in the head, not one little action following another but a huge mess of actions crammed into two second with no conscious thought.

His shoulder pinned her against the trunk and then he slumped down to the ground allowing her to step around him and free. His arm snagged her rooster cuts on the way down and she swore and kicked him until he turned over onto his back. She kicked the knife away to be safe and checked that he was definitely dead- the back of his skull blown across half the field.

Taking a deep breath, she headed back for the house. Jack would know what to do. She just needed to hang tight until he got back. Patch up her leg. Get a glass of water. Find another pair of pants. Wait for Jack.

It was almost lunchtime before she heard the rumble of the truck pulling back into the driveway. The bed was full of supplies – cases of ammo, assault rifles, animal feed, rolls of chicken wire. Jack and Abigail both had black goo splashes all over them but otherwise seemed unhurt.

She led them up to the mushroom patch where they found three infected feasting on what remained of Eldon Stammets. They decapitated them and then debated whether to bury Stammets or to finish burying his victims. In the end there was no time. They needed to be out of there well before three so that Bedelia wouldn’t have to navigate in the dark.

It took about an hour to load the boat up with the animals and the supplies they had scavenged. Bev brought the basket of mushrooms as well so that she could study them. Stammets may have been a few options short of a salad bar but she was 90% sure it wasn’t Good & Plenties that had been the source of his immunity.

Back at the farm, she was annoyed to watch Abigail just throw down a bunch of chicken feed and then calmly collect each of them into cages while they were distracted.

The only thing they left behind was the rooster that had maimed her. Bev did leave the coop door open for him though. They were all just trying to survive at the end of the day and she’d already killed her quota of assholes.

The trip downstream was much quicker. The docked at the marina just as it was beginning to get dark. They raced to load up the RV and then to drive it home. Meanwhile Bedelia took

the boat back around to moor at the yacht repair yard so it would be easier to collect if they took it out again. They met her there and then returned to the house.

There weren't too many infected on the south side of the barricades so they shifted them, drove in, shifted them back.

She helped unload the RV until she was nearing collapse. Then she all but inhaled the huge bowl of chowder Hannibal had made for them. Upstairs, shower, decide no stitches necessary, pyjamas, brush teeth, collapse on bed.

I killed someone today, she told herself, her eyes fluttering behind their lids.

You kill someone every day, she replied just before she dropped off.

# Manifestation

Chapter Notes

Kind of spank- and angst-heavy (again, sorry!) and plot-light so if that isn't your thing feel free to give a miss.

Also thanks for all your patience and sorry for the slow updates - have been sick the past two months but determined to press on to the full Hannigram section. If you're wondering *spoilers*...

Everybody ages up after the cub is born - maybe tennish more chapters(?)

“This is such bullshit,” Randall said thumping down the socket wrench and trying to lean the half-assembled changing table frame against the wall in a way that wouldn’t cause the whole thing to collapse and shatter.

Sitting on the floor and addressing the fluttering in his stomach, he said, “Your sire could have grabbed stuff that was already assembled. He’s just trying to torture me.”

There was another little flicker under his belly button that Randall interpreted as laughter.

“Yeah, yeah, hilarious. Let’s see how funny you and your papa think it is when I’m changing you in the kitchen sink.”

“Are you talking to him again?” Will asked coming into the new nursery with the lunch tray their Alpha had assembled for them before going on watch. He sat down next to his brother with the tray in between them and picked up one of the sandwiches – some kind of fancy tuna fish.

“No,” Randall scowled grabbing the other one.

This was what he got for asking for something useful to do. To be fair, he suspected that Hannibal was mostly just humouring him and that if he wanted to stay in bed sleeping for the next four months until the cub came his Alpha would be just as happy if not more so.

But he hadn’t meant shifting all the contents of the plant nursery to Bella’s greenhouse and then repainting, and assembling all the baby furniture. Every day their Alpha had some new busy work for him. Randall had built all the chicken coops and rabbit hutches. He, Will and Peter (as he wanted to be called now) were in charge of feeding and taking care of all the animals.

They had a long list of other chores too – mostly food prep, keeping supply inventories, tidying, and training the dog to bark at infected and not at everything else. On a good day,

they got to do some light demolition work as well. Hannibal wanted a system of escape routes through the townhouses just in case so sometimes they got smash through walls which was very therapeutic.

It was all indoors though, except for the hour or two they got to go to the garden next door to take care of the animals. And maybe another hour or so walking around the perimeter of their own garden if it was a nice day and there was someone to supervise them like they were little cubs.

It was a big house and there was always a lot to do but after two months Randall was crawling the walls. He couldn't remember a time in his life when they'd spent two months in the same town let alone in the same house.

The others all got to go out into the real world whenever they wanted, living real lives and doing real things. Even the other omegas got to go anywhere they wanted in the compound without someone hovering over them all the time. But he was stuck in the same house where he spent 99% of his time trying to decipher furniture assembly instructions that were written in Italian.

"Can I feel it?" Will asked for the four thousandth time that week.

Randall rolled his eyes and then led his brother's hand over to rest under his shirt in approximately the location where the cub was gurgling away.

Hannibal was still teaching him how to read almost every night, usually using books about what to expect from the pregnancy. He knew that the cub was the size of a banana and was supposed to start kicking soon. He definitely had a bump now, even when he tried to suck his stomach in, but it was still small enough to hide if he wore baggy clothes.

Ever since he'd worked out that the occasional quivery feeling in the pit of his stomach was really the cub and had made the mistake of telling Will and his Alpha, every time they saw him they wanted to paw at him.

"I still can't feel anything," Will announced pulling his hand back and grabbing some pretzels instead. "What does it feel like?"

"I don't know."

"Come on..."

"Like pop rocks in my belly button, I guess."

"Ewww!"

"Well, you asked."

"Can you still feel it now?"

Randall nodded and Will reached over to feel his stomach again. Randall moved to give him a friendly push away and Will leaned back knocking the table frame over with a loud crash.

They scrambled to their feet just as Bella came in to check on them.

“Everything OK, boys? Do you need any help?”

“No, thank you,” Will replied. “Sorry, we just dropped it.”

“That’s OK. Just try to keep it down a little. Alana and Abigail are sleeping down the hall.”

They promised to be quiet and then, once Bella had gone back downstairs, inspected the frame for damage. It seemed fine but there was a little scrape in the paint on the wall.

They’d just have to put a drawing or something on top of it, Randall decided - painting the room had been such a pain in the ass in the first place. He leaned the cardboard box over the scratch in the meantime. If Hannibal saw it, he would insist that they repaint the whole room. Everything always had to be absolutely spotlessly perfect with him all the time.

“Do you want me to hold it up for you?” Will asked as he handed the wrench back to his brother.

“No, let’s do something else.”

“Like what?”

“Anything. Something different.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we’ve been here two months and we’ve never even seen what one of the monsters looks like.”

“You mean go outside?”

“No, I just mean look out the windows in one of the street-facing houses. Just to see what they look like. We’d still be totally safe. Peter and Bella live in those houses and must get to see them any time they want and nobody cares.”

“Our Alpha would care. We’re not supposed to leave the house.”

“He’ll only care if we get caught. We can use the interior passage between the townhouses so nobody will see us. It will only take like ten minutes tops. And Alpha is on watch until after dinner.”

“I mean I guess if all the buildings are connected, it’s not really like leaving the house. It’s not like going outside, outside.”

“There you go!” Randall said.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like a good idea. He and Will used to watch monster movies all the time so how scary could the real thing possibly be. And it’s not like they were putting themselves in any actual danger. And even if they did get caught, they

might get a spanking but then their Alpha would see that actually they weren't that scared or upset and maybe he would reconsider letting them out of the house more and stop treating them like cubs.

They crept down to the dining room as quietly as they could. Bella was in the kitchen working on lunch and everyone else was either on watch, asleep or in one of the other houses. They snuck out the French doors, which thankfully didn't creak and then slunk along the garden walls under the covered walkway to the back of the garage.

They'd put in a new passage between the inside of their garage and the neighbour's garage to make it quicker to go over and feed the animals. From there it was easy to skirt along the neighbour's garden wall and through their dining room doors into the house.

It still smelled like old lady a bit and all the furnishings were fussy and dusty. It had been so long since Randall had seen anything new and different though it was hard not to want to stop and look around a little.

But Will was on a mission now and dragged him upstairs to the beginning of the series of corridors they had knocked through the townhouse walls.

"Come on, we said ten minutes. Bella could come up looking for us any time."

They wended their way through a series of rooms and corridors until they were almost to the corner site. The south facing windows would look out onto the open street but that house was also one of the watch posts. They weren't sure who was assigned to which house or where in the house they would be.

Randall started to reconsider the entire stupid idea. He'd seen enough movies to know what zombies looked like. And Hannibal was never going to be impressed by them having the guts to look at one out a window. And the probability of them getting caught seemed to grow with each step they took.

He was just about to grab Will's shoulder and suggest they go back when the younger omega darted through the hole in the wall into the last house, crossed the bedroom and peeked out into the stair landing to check for the guard. When he didn't see anyone he signalled Randall to follow him and then crept through the corridor to the back bedroom and then through into the next house.

Randall relaxed slightly once they made it through the corner house without getting busted. As long as they were here, they might as well see what they came for very quickly and then head back.

They went to one of the street facing windows and peeked out. It was a bright sunny day and everything was quiet. There was still some snow on the ground and they could see tracks through it but the zombies themselves were nowhere in sight.

They waited a few minutes hoping some would pass by but they seemed to be out of luck.

As they were about to head back though, Will pointed out a scrawny little dog limping down the middle of the road. It was a terrier mutt, probably mostly Jack Russell with a face like a little Boxer.

“He’s hurt,” Will whispered pointing to the red stains in the dog’s fur around his belly.

“Maybe a zombie bit him. Can dogs get it too?”

“I don’t think so,” Will replied. “Max is immune anyway.”

Will pulled a bag of dog treats out of his pocket, tilted one of the windows slightly out and threw half a biscuit so it landed in the middle of the road. The dog hobbled over to it, sniffed it suspiciously and then ate, looking around all the time to check he was still safe.

“See if you can get him to come closer to the door,” Will said handing the bag to his brother and starting to head for the stairs.

“You can’t be serious,” Randall whispered at him. “Even if you don’t get caught, where are you going to tell Alpha you got another dog?”

“We can just say he crawled in under the cars. There’s bound to be a hole somewhere,” Will said. “Come on, before he runs away.”

Before he could respond, Will dashed out of the room and down the stairs. Randall turned, checked that there were still no zombies in sight and then threw a little trail of biscuits leading from the dog to the front porch.

The dog was hesitant to follow but, after the third biscuit, started to wag his tail slightly. Randall heard a slight scraping noise downstairs as Will shifted some of the furniture blocking the front door. In addition to the thousands of other reasons this was a colossally stupid idea, whoever was on watch in the next house probably heard it too.

Randall leaned his head out of the window. Checking from side to side he didn’t see any zombies or any obvious signs that someone in one of the other houses was on to them. Looking down he saw Will extend his arm out so that the dog could sniff at it.

The dog hesitated again but eventually crawled closer to the arm on his belly. He was wearing a collar so he must have been someone’s pet. After a few shy sniffs he seemed happy to let Will scratch him behind the ears. Randall dropped another biscuit straight down, careful not to hit either of them and Will picked it up and fed it to the dog.

Will had his hand around the dog’s collar and was gently pulling him in when Randall heard a startled yelp and saw both arm and dog disappear through the door. There were some more scraping sounds as Randall pulled his head back in and latched the window shut.

He crept over to the top of the stairs where he could see the dog dash off barking into another room and then Jack dragging Will by the scruff of his neck and shaking him.

“Does Hannibal know you’re out here?” Jack demanded as he shook Will again with one hand and pulled his belt off with the other.

Randall froze. On the one hand, everything inside him was screaming to go help his brother but on the other hand he didn't stand a chance against a pissed off Alpha three times his size. All going downstairs was going to accomplish was getting them both busted.

"No Alpha," he could hear Will offering nervously in response. "I just wanted to help the dog and I didn't really go outside – just leaned a little."

With the belt free, Jack started whacking Will on the backside with it without further preamble. Will leapt around trying to avoid it, so Jack hauled him over the side of the banister and started belting him again in between scolding him.

"You. Stay. Where. You're. Told. You. Don't. Go. Outside. Without. Permission."

Will stopped kicking and struggling about halfway through and just clung onto the railing crying. Randall started crying in sympathy, a giant ball of guilt settling in his gut, but he was too afraid to go down and reveal himself.

"I'm sorry," Will started wailing. "I'm sorry... just please don't tell Alpha."

Jack lifted him back onto his feet before responding, "He's not your Alpha. He's your foster-sire. And that's not how things work around here pup. You break the rules and you face the consequences. We're all 100% on the same page about that."

Jack started pulling Will along by the upper arm, presumably back to their house. Randall got a brief glimpse of Will's tearful and accusatory eyes before they were out of sight.

Released from his paralysis as soon as he heard the door slam, Randall raced back to the passageway through the townhouses. Through some of the windows, he could see Jack proceeding down the alley through the middle of the block with Will in tow. When they were about halfway back, he could also see Hannibal coming out of the corner townhouse on the far side. It was too far away to see his expression but Randall could guess.

He had to be careful timing his dash through the neighbours' yard to their garage to avoid being seen by either Jack or Hannibal passing by the gate. He made it though, slipping into their garage past all the unhelpfully squawky chickens and bleating goats and then, as quietly as he could, down into the basement.

His first instinct was to race back upstairs again so he wouldn't miss anything but he was sweating buckets and breathing hard so he ran into the bedroom instead, towelled himself off, splashed his face with cold water and changed into fresh clothes.

By the time his breath had calmed down and he wandered casually back up into the kitchen, everything had already kicked off.

"Where's your brother?" Hannibal was demanding. He and Jack both had a grip on one of the omega's shoulders. Meanwhile Bella was nervously cleaning up after lunch and Bedelia was hovering around the counter sipping her coffee.

Will shrugged staring at the floor so Randall piped up, "Here I am."

He added in a few extra blinks and rubbed an eye to suggest he had just woken up.

“And where have you been?” Jack added.

“Downstairs,” Randall answered in his most innocent tone and flicking his eyes to the floor. It wasn’t technically untrue. “What happened?”

“Your brother decided to sneak into one of the other townhouses and then out into one of the open streets,” Jack said more to their Alpha than to Randall.

“I just wanted to save the dog,” Will explained hopelessly. “I didn’t really go outside.”

“No, you just moved the barricade on the door and leaned out into a street full of infected where anything could have happened to you.”

“There weren’t any monsters. I checked,” Will protested before looking up at their Alpha and realising he was just digging himself in deeper.

While Hannibal still looked neutral, Randall could see the nerve in his forehead pulsing in a way that made him want to crawl back into the basement as fast as he could and never come back up again.

Even Jack seemed to pick up on how furious he was. Unfortunately, he continued in the least helpful way possible.

“Well, we’ve taken care of it now, haven’t we Will?” Jack relaxed the hand that had been gripping his jacket and gave him a pat on the shoulder.

Will looked around between the Alphas like he had just landed from outer space.

“What do you mean?” Hannibal asked the other Alpha steadily, releasing Will as well.

“He’s had a spanking and now I think he needs to apologise and spend a few days in his room reflecting on this foolishness. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Hannibal looked at Jack like his head had split open and Tweety birds had started pouring out.

“Would I agree that it’s acceptable for you to discipline my omega without talking to me about it first? I would not.”

“He’s not your omega,” Jack sighed with exasperation. It’s like he had a manual somewhere telling him how to throw gas on this particular fire to make it as bad as humanly possible. “He’s an orphan omega cub who lives in our community. You know, all the other people who live here too.”

Jack waved his arm around in emphasis at the mostly empty room peppered with people who were generally wishing it was entirely empty.

“I made a judgment call that his behaviour needed to be dealt with on the spot. As an Alpha in this community, I have that right. And if you think you get to tell Bella off when she’s just trying to help but me calling out your pups on their constant disrespect and disobedience is crossing a line...”

“I’m sorry,” Will bawled suddenly with tears in his eyes and his hands clapped over both ears.

“The omegas should go upstairs,” Bedelia interjected. “They don’t need to be here for this.”

Hannibal managed to unclench his jaw long enough to order them up to their bedroom. Will sprinted as soon as he said it and Bella and Randall followed trying to linger at the bottom of the stairs to catch a few extra seconds until Jack pointed to them and then to the ceiling.

Up in the bedroom, Will had sprawled out face down on the covers. Bella went to sit next to him, rubbing his back. Randall curled up in one of the chairs by the fireplace and buried his face in his knees.

The whole thing was his fault and he’d let his little brother take the blame for it like the worst kind of... something. Now they all hated him, including their Alpha who, he was sure, hadn’t bought his little act for a second. And he deserved it.

“It will all be okay,” Bella assured them leaning over to kiss the back of Will’s head. “They’re only angry because they care about you pups so much and want to keep you safe. And they’re just having a little disagreement about the best way to do that.”

“But you get to live in one of the houses by the street,” Will said turning his head to face her. “And you and Peter get to go anywhere you want. It’s not fair that we have to stay in only one house.”

“Well, I suppose Hannibal is worried that, because you’re so much younger, you might exercise some poor judgement. For example, by opening one of the doors out into the street by yourself.”

So much for getting some sympathy or dynamic-solidarity, Randall thought.

“I wouldn’t have, except I checked and checked and the street was empty and we wanted to save the dog. He was injured and hungry. It wasn’t really dangerous, I promise!”

“But you still shouldn’t have snuck out without telling anyone where you were going. And if you wanted to open the door, you should have gotten someone to help you. Jack was right next door. It’s not because you’re an omega. It’s because our situation is so dangerous and you’re still a cub really even though you’re very smart and brave and capable too. We all have to learn how to ask for help and rely on each other and work as a team – even our bullheaded Alphas.”

Bella gave Will’s ribs a tickle and he rolled over a little more smiling.

“Do you think Buster will be alright?”

“Is that the dog?”

“Yes, that’s what his nametag says.”

“Is he still outside?”

“No, I brought him in. But he ran away.”

“Do you want me to see if I can find him and bring him back here?”

Will nodded and Bella smiled giving him another kiss on the forehead before heading back downstairs. With the door open, they could hear Jack bellowing but couldn’t make out any of the specific words.

As soon as she was gone, Randall came over and lay on the bed with his head on his brother’s stomach.

“Sorry,” he said. “It was all my fault.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Will sniffed stoically. “There’s no point in both of us getting in trouble for it.”

Randall felt another little flip-flop in his gut and reached Will’s hand over to cover the area.

“Can you feel that one?”

“No,” Will told him solemnly. “It’s probably just gas.”

“Shut up. It isn’t. Some uncle you’re turning out to be.”

“Just wait until he’s old enough to understand some of the stories I’m going to tell him about you...”

They lay on the bed together for half an hour talking together about other things until Hannibal came back in. As soon as they heard the door opening though, they jumped up to their feet with their heads hung.

While he was still in a terrible mood, he no longer seemed on the verge of snapping. Being forgiven by Will had unclenched the giant ball of guilt in Randall’s chest somewhat but seeing their Alpha so disappointed and angry brought it all crashing back again. He felt like he could barely catch his breath and was nearly in tears.

“Sorry Alpha,” they both said in unison as Hannibal sat on the bed and signalled for them to shift around so they were facing him.

“I’m not going to tell you pups again,” the Alpha started. “You do not leave this house without permission. Do you know why?”

“Yes, Alpha,” Will replied quickly. “It’s too dangerous. I’m really sorry. It was so stupid. I don’t know what I was thinking. It will never happen again. I promise.”

“If it does, you’re not going to sit down for a week and you’ll be lucky if you’re allowed to leave the basement. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Alpha. Completely. I’m really, really sorry. I feel sick just thinking about it.” Looking over, Will did look a little green around the gills. Randall’s giant ball of guilt compressed another few degrees.

“I can’t understand what you were thinking. You know the rules. You know the consequences. I certainly don’t enjoy punishing you and I can’t imagine that you enjoy it either.”

“I don’t. I just... I’ve never seen the monsters and I thought it wasn’t really that dangerous to just look at one of them out the window because Bella and Peter get that close all the time so how bad can it be? And I tried to be really, really careful.”

“Is it your job to decide what’s too dangerous for you pups or not?”

“No, Alpha. It’s yours,” Will conceded staring at his feet.

“You’re grounded for the next two weeks, Will. That means you stay in the room I tell you to stay in except for trips to the bathroom. Understood? After that we can reassess what’s an appropriate level of independence for you to have in light of the very poor judgement you’ve shown today.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Good pup,” Hannibal told him with a light pat on the cheek. “Why don’t you go back to your other bedroom then and read until dinnertime?”

“Yes, Alpha,” Will replied visibly relieved not to be getting another spanking. He turned on his heel and all but ran out of the room.

When Randall turned back to look at Hannibal his eyes seemed to be boring straight through him. He knows, Randall thought. It’s so obvious. I might as well pin a note to my chest or shout it out the window. He tried to stop the tears welling up in his eyes but it was useless.

“Anything you want to say to me, pup?” Hannibal asked in his kindest tone – another form of torture.

Randall felt something caught in his throat and his shoulders hitching with a sob and his facing scrunching up compulsively like a stupid little kid having a tantrum. His heart was racing and he was so miserable he thought nothing could ever possibly feel worse.

“I went too,” he blurted out. “The whole stupid thing was my stupid idea. I’m so sorry. It was really... stupid.”

When he dared to look up again the Alpha was giving him a little smile – not exactly smug but not a million miles away either.

“Thank you for telling me,” Hannibal said. “I may have had a suspicion.”

“I’m really, really sorry. I feel terrible. And I lied about it too. And I almost let Will take all the blame. And everything was totally my fault.”

Left for a few more seconds, Randall suspected he would have started confessing to all his shoplifting and the time he dismantled the microwave in the break room at one of his sire’s jobs.

Fortunately, his Alpha stepped in. “The same things I said to Will go for you too. Except you’re older and I expect better. Your brother looks up to you and you have a responsibility to set a good example and keep him away from dangerous situations.”

Randall felt like he’d been punched in the gut.

“I don’t suppose you have a better excuse.”

“No Alpha. Sorry. I just didn’t want you to think I was afraid of them. The zombies.”

“You should be afraid of them,” Hannibal replied. “If you weren’t, you’d be an idiot. And I certainly don’t think you’re that. At least most of the time...”

Hannibal tilted his chin up so he could see the affection in his eyes. Somehow that just made him feel even worse though.

“You’re grounded for two weeks too. And you’re getting a spanking. With extra for lying when we first asked you about it.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“But I’m proud of you for owning up to it.”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Let’s go then,” Hannibal said standing up and leading the omega downstairs with a hand on his neck. His grip wasn’t very firm though and he gave him a friendly pat when they got to the study.

Randall leaned over the desk while Hannibal pulled his pants down and started belting him. It hurt like a son of a bitch but not as bad as the shame that had been collecting in his chest ever since Jack nabbed his little brother. About halfway through he could feel everything start to unclench and the tears that started flowing now were more for release than from pain.

Hannibal kept going until Randall could barely hold himself up on the edge of the desk anymore and then stopped, pulling his pants back up, rubbing his back and telling him what a good boy he was.

He didn’t exactly feel like a good boy but he didn’t feel like the worst one ever born anymore so it was a start.

His Alpha let him sit in his lap and scent him for a while until he was able to stop crying.

“Really sorry, Alpha.”

“I know pup. But I know you’re going to do better next time, right?”

Randall nodded into his chest. He felt so relaxed it was like he’d just woken up to a fresh day.

“How is everything coming along in the nursery?” Hannibal asked rubbing circles on his stomach. Normally Randall didn’t like having his belly pawed at, but this time felt kind of nice.

“The changing table is impossible. All the instructions are in Italian and you need eight hands to keep all the pieces from falling apart.”

“So leggere l'italiano,” Hannibal whispered in his ear and Randall found himself starting to slick up a little despite himself.

“And I have at least two more hands,” he added letting them drift down to the omega’s legs so they brushed over his cock. “Do you want to work on it together for a while? I can’t wait to see the whole room put together and to have the cub sleeping safely in there. Love what a good pup you are and how hard you’ve been working on our home.”

Randall hummed and shifted a little so he could kiss his Alpha and hold onto his broad shoulders.

“Maybe in a little bit,” Randall agreed.

# Incorporation

When the ground started to thaw, Jack ran a scavenged rototiller over all of the back lawns that got decent sun and Bella started organising her big plant out sessions. Several of the houses had greenhouses or conservatories and all of them were packed to the gills with seedlings. The Alphas all took pains to assure her that the world wouldn't end if they didn't manage a totally self-sufficient crop that year but after four months of eating mostly canned or dried vegetables they were all excited to see some fresh produce.

Today the omegas and Bedelia were planting out the six hundred onion sets Jack had brought back from Sykesville and sowing rows of snap peas, lettuce, carrots, chard, beets and parsnips.

Since standing and kneeling over and over made Randall dizzy, Bella gave him the basket of sets to distribute while she, Will and Peter crawled along on their hands and knees planting in the furrows Bedelia dug with a hoe.

It was a bright spring morning and nobody was in a hurry. All of the omegas were excited to be outside in the fresh air and doing something productive. While Randall had finished the nursery and built more outdoor runs and pens for all the animals, Hannibal flatly refused to even discuss letting him train with weapons, learn self-defence or step five feet out of their house unsupervised.

The one job Randall had been allowed to help with which he'd kind of enjoyed was rigging up all the security cameras to a central monitoring system in their basement. That let them cut the number of people on watch shifts in half which meant Hannibal could spend more time at home and everyone wasn't as exhausted and cranky all the time.

Bedelia had even insisted they set up the schedule so that everyone got at least one "off" day once a week. There were no signs of a cure or the reestablishment of civilisation any time soon. They hadn't seen another living soul in two months. Which meant, as Bedelia put it, they needed pace themselves if they meant to be in it for the long haul.

It was currently her "off" day but she insisted that she enjoyed gardening as a hobby so helping them with the planting didn't count as work. Most of the rest of them had similar "hobbies" that gave them excuses to keep busy even when they were supposed to be resting. Price had his beehives, Katz was studying epidemiology text books and Abigail spent hour after hour improving her archery skills and teaching Alana how to shoot.

Randall had wanted to help with installing the solar panels as well, but Hannibal had yet another irrational objection to him climbing ladders or being on the roofs "in his state" – easily the three most hateful words in the English language he was quickly discovering. If he was "in a state", who's fault was it?

In any case, they had enough panels now to power Hannibal's and Jack's houses without having to ration electricity anymore and they were planning to rig up Bedelia's house once all the spring garden work was done.

Meanwhile, they'd gotten used to her and Peter crashing breakfast every morning and then hanging out during the day. The skinny omega had recovered quite a bit. He was still scrawny but no longer emaciated and was still hyperaware of everything going on but didn't immediate flee into a corner every time a noise startled him.

He spent most of his time taking care of the animals and trying to humanely trap pigeons. At first, Hannibal hadn't been too keen on Will and Randall spending time with Peter but he seemed to accept at this point that he was more or less harmless.

He didn't know that Bedelia still enlisted Will sometimes to help with therapy sessions when he was on watch. Will had had a few nightmares as a result to the point that Randall debated whether or not he should tell their Alpha but Will insisted he was fine and he would never speak to Randall again if he ratted them out. So he had more or less left it alone.

Peter still creeped him out a little bit though. He couldn't put his finger on why. He felt sorry for him. It's obvious his Alpha had been a nightmare. And Will told him he was messed up but harmless. But Randall also got shivers up his spine any time he had to sit close to him.

And now, for example. Why was Peter stealing creepy glances at his stomach instead of paying attention to what he was doing? Randall knew he looked like he'd swallowed a volleyball. He didn't need to be reminded of it on the one enjoyable day they'd had for weeks.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked the skinny omega, unable to keep his annoyance out of his voice.

"Sorry," Peter said immediately, ducking his head. "I was just... do you know... can you tell if it's an Alpha or omega? The cub I mean."

"How would I know?" Randall replied before catching Bella and Bedelia smiling cryptically at each other.

"Do you know? How do you know?"

"It's definitely an Alpha, sweetheart," Bella said grinning again at Bedelia who nodded sagely in agreement, a little smirk twisting her lips.

"How can you tell?"

"All the classic signs," Bedelia said leaning on her hoe.

"Sleeping and eating all the time," Bella listed.

"Alpha cubs are usually larger and take a bigger toll on your system," Bedelia explained. "It could be twins, but an Alpha is more likely."

"I don't eat all the time," Randall objected although, to be fair, his stomach was grumbling and if his hands weren't covered in dirt he would have already dug into the bag of pretzels in his pocket.

“And, sorry to say it, but you have one of the worst cases of ‘hot pants’ I’ve ever seen,” Bella added with a knowing smile.

“What’s... oh.” Randall felt himself blushing bright red. He couldn’t believe they were discussing this with Will sitting right there.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Bella teased him. “We all think it’s sweet you can’t keep your hands off each other.”

“Why does that mean the cub’s an Alpha though? That just sounds like an old omega’s tale.”

“There’s some evidence,” Bedelia explained, “that Alpha cubs born from Alpha-omega pairs that are frequently intimate tend to have higher birth weights, to display dominance characteristics at an earlier age, to find mates at a younger age and to have more offspring. Researchers have speculated that there’s a transfer of hormones that signals to the cub that their carrier is a favoured mate and that their parents’ relationship is secure. It could also be a way to ensure that first-born Alpha cubs have a head start over their younger siblings, who they are likely going to need to lead when they are older.”

Randall felt increasingly confused and a little annoyed that everyone seemed to know about this except him. He wondered if Hannibal had known this whole time and was only mounting him all day every day to get a bigger cub.

“So the cub wants them to get it on?” Will asked.

“Oh my god, can we please stop talking about this!” Randall thought about storming off to get away from them but the only place to go was back inside and he wasn’t ready to give up on the sunshine and fresh air yet.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Bella said with her musical laugh. “We’re not trying to embarrass you. Really. You’re just... lucky... and we don’t have enough of our own business to mind. So I hope you won’t take it personally if we mind yours for a bit.”

Randall shrugged and gave them each another handful of sets hoping that refocusing on the job would change the topic of conversation.

There were a few things he wanted to discuss with his Alpha though as soon as they were done.

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The omegas spent the whole morning planting out the garden and were exhausted but in high spirits at lunch. Abigail was coming off her watch shift and joined them, reflecting that they had never seemed so much like one big family as they did that morning.

Hannibal made them all goat cheese frittatas and was in his element serving them up and asking all of the omegas eagerly about their progress in the garden. He’d been working closely with Bella for the last few months on her garden plan and scavenging lists to ensure

that, even in the midst of the zombie apocalypse, he still had access to a steady supply of Jerusalem artichokes and shiso and a million other plants Abigail had never heard of.

After lunch, Bella wanted to test the sprinkler system to water in the new plants. They all crowded out to the garden to watch since this was apparently what passed for entertainment now in the absence of television or internet.

They all clapped and jumped up and down when the water started spraying everywhere. Abigail chased Will under the spray threatening to tickle him until Bella made them stop – afraid that they might trample some of the new beds. Will pretended he hadn't enjoyed it and that his dignity was mortally wounded. For such a young pup, he could be surprisingly curmudgeonly. Abigail loved prodding him into acting his age though.

Nothing she did was as effective as the dogs though. They had three now – Max and Buster and a long-haired Chihuahua cross named Zoe whom Jack had found on one of his expeditions. Her jaw had been dislocated and had healed back awkwardly giving her a strange overbite that exposed all of her bottom teeth. Will seemed to love her all the same though.

All three came tumbling through the garden gate now wanting to see what all the excitement was about and immediately ran into the newly sown garden patch trying to stick their heads in front of the sprinklers.

"No, no, no, no, no" Bella chanted as she ran to try to pull them away and put them back out into the alley before they dug up all their work. Abigail and Will ran to help, each grabbing one of the dogs out of the spray and carrying them away. Abigail got Buster who was by far the fastest and most determined not to be caught. She had to chase him up and down and across several rows before she could catch him.

After chucking the mutt out the gate and closing it firmly, she turned and caught Hannibal's eyes lingering on her soaking wet shirt which was clinging in all the most awkward places. Like, "Hello, nipples!" She blushed and looked away awkwardly but out of the corner of her eye she had the satisfaction of watching him reluctantly looking away. He actually wants me, she thought, her heart starting to race a little. How can I make him look at me like that again?

Slow your roll, she told herself. He's already mated. Although in the current circumstances what did that actually mean? There was no law against Alphas taking more than one mate. It was just so expensive that it almost never happened. Most Alphas had to save up for like ten years to afford their first omega. Each subsequent mate they bought from an Omega Institute or paid dowry for cost twice as much as the last one to ensure that there were enough to go around. So by the third or fourth omega it became astronomically expensive.

And some Alphas kept beta "mates" on the side without officially bonding with them - either while they were saving up for their "real" omega mate or to help out with the donkey work while their omega mate was indisposed. Most beta parents wouldn't dream of letting their kids be kept under those terms. "Stick to your own," was what her mom had told her when she was crushing on an Alpha boy in her class. "You deserve better than a man who is always going to put his omega before you."

But how many other opportunities were likely to present themselves? And where were her parents to object? And just watching him cross the room gave her stupid butterflies in her stomach. It made her whole day just scenting his aftershave when he leaned around her to put a plate in front of her at the table. Every time he said something directly to her it felt like the whole room was melting around her. And even the stupidest little compliment made her feel like the world's most random peasant girl being picked out of a crowd of thousands to come up and marry the Crown Prince.

She was about to risk another direct look at him when the sprinklers started sputtering, then shooting out brown water, then died down to nothing.

"Rats!" Bella exclaimed. "Did the hose get twisted somewhere?"

While the omegas checked the hoses, Abigail ran back to the main house to change into dry clothes. When she went to wash her hands though, she found that only brown water came out of the faucet and then it went dry as well.

They spent the next hour confirming that the municipal water supply was no longer working and then gathered in the dining room in a mild state of shock.

"There's no need to panic," Jack assured them. Nobody was panicking as far as Abigail could see but it didn't seem like the time to be arguing. "We have plenty of bottled water for the next few days until we figure this out. And if we need to, we can organise a few runs to get some more."

"We're probably lucky that the water supply lasted as long as it did," Bedelia added.

Bella looked distraught. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to use it all up like that just for the garden."

"It's not your fault," Hannibal reassured her. "The public system was bound to fail eventually now that there's nobody left maintaining it."

"So what do we do?" Jack asked. "Try to find the blockage or the leak? There could be thousands of miles of pipes. And we're not exactly equipped to explore or repair them."

"Or we try to find another water source," Bedelia continued.

"Drinking water for twelve people plus three dogs plus all the other animals plus water to flush the toilets and take showers and wash the dishes... how many gallons a day is that? And that doesn't even factor in trying to irrigate enough garden to feed everyone. I don't even want to think how many runs a day that would be. Maybe this is a sign that we need to seriously re-evaluate our strategy here..." Jack paced along the side of the table as he outlined how hopeless their position seemed.

"What about the church?" Abigail suggested.

"While normally prayer doesn't hurt, in these circumstances..." Bella replied gently.

“No, I mean the name of the church is ‘Sacred Well’. So maybe it was built on top of a well or something.”

They were all looking at her like she was from Mars.

“Don’t you think that’s more likely to be a figurative expression?” Bedelia suggested in her most condescending tone.

“It won’t hurt to check,” Hannibal said, coming to her rescue again. It was everything she could do to stop from flinging herself on him then and there. “Why don’t we see if we can find something?”

Hannibal walked out into the garden and Abigail followed sure that her cheeks were blazing. Don’t look back, she told herself. You’ll just look more suspicious. She did take a quick peek at the gate and was embarrassed again by how relieved she felt that nobody else was following them.

She ran up the alley after Hannibal who held the gate to the churchyard open for her. If he’d had a top hat, she suspected he would have doffed it for her.

They split up to search between all of the gravestones for anything that might be a wellhead. It wasn’t a very large yard and it didn’t take long to confirm there was nothing.

“The font is still bubbling,” Hannibal said with a relieved smile when they met up again inside the church. “That’s a good sign. It seems to be on its own system. Let’s check the catacombs.”

While Abigail had been in the church and yard almost every day on her way to and back from watch shifts, she hadn’t been down in the catacombs since the day they had first cleared the building. They were creepy, humid, covered in cobwebs and dark. They had only gone down there before long enough to conclude that there was no reason they ever needed to go down there again.

She stayed close behind Hannibal who held up their only gas lantern and tried not to think about all the decaying bodies in the caged alcoves on both sides of them. They were all more than a hundred years old, so they were probably just bones in boxes but that didn’t make it any less ghoulish.

They wound down a series of passages until Abigail was completely disorientated. There was really only one main passage spiralling around and around so she didn’t think she was exactly lost but she had no idea what direction they were facing or what part of the church they were under.

“Štai jis,” he said suddenly kneeling a little and directing the lantern at a low alcove on the side of the passage. There was a circular hole in the ground with a thick, round wooden cover. Pulling it aside by the handles and holding the lantern down into the shaft, they could see water five or six feet down.

“It’s spring-fed,” Hannibal told her pointing to the bubbles at the centre before pulling the lantern back up, setting it down and dragging the cover back in place.

He stood back up again, looking supremely satisfied, and then, clasping both sides of her jaw, kissed her full on the mouth.

“Clever girl,” he said pulling away again.

And with her brain completely short-circuiting again, Abigail leaned forward and kissed him like there was nothing else she knew how to do. He pushed her back, still connected, until her back thumped against the stone column and a shower of dust fell on them and she didn’t even care anymore. She was absolutely aching for him like the entire world was going to end when their kiss did.

It didn’t unfortunately. He pulled away saying, “Abigail, Abigail” and she felt such crushing embarrassment she wanted to dash away except she was in the dark and didn’t know how to get out and this was the part where he pointed out how absurd it was for her to think she had a chance with someone like him.

“I’m sorry,” she said looking down and trying to find the lantern so she could flee. He’d stopped kissing her but his body still had her half-pinned against the wall.

“What are you sorry about?” She couldn’t tell if he was mocking her or just feeling sorry for her. Oh god, this was stupidest thing she’d ever done.

“I’m sorry. This is so bad. Can we please, please forget this ever happened?”

“Do you want to bond with me? It’s okay if you do. I’d like to bond with you too. But we’d need to talk about some things first. And I’d need to discuss it with Randall. That’s the only reason I stopped.”

“Seriously?”

“Of course, why wouldn’t I be?”

Abigail could think of about a hundred reasons off the top of her head but suspected that self-deprecation was not the way to get him in her pants and that was the *only* thing she knew for a certainty she wanted since the second he stood up.

He gave her another kiss that was much too short.

“Let’s go tell the others about the well. I’ll talk to Randall this afternoon. If you still want to bond, go to the bedroom in the basement after 10 and I’ll see you down there. I don’t want you to feel any obligation, Abigail, and if you do change your mind we can let everything go back to the way it was before. Or we can wait if you feel like you’re not ready.”

“No, I’m ready,” she responded with absolutely no chill. Seriously could she sound any more desperate?

“Good,” he said with another quick kiss before he picked up the lantern and led them out.

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Hannibal was planning to have his discussion with Randall in the study after dinner but was surprised when the omega cornered him first.

“Can I ask something?” he said shyly from the door of the en suite.

“Of course, any time,” Hannibal replied, drying his hands and coming back into the bedroom.

He wasn’t sure where the best place to have the conversation was. With the omega on his knees, he’d be able to monitor his facial expressions better but that seemed a little cold and distant for what was potentially going to be a very difficult discussion. So instead, Hannibal decided to sit back on the bed and let the omega curl into his lap.

“What’s troubling you?” he asked once Randall was settled.

“Bella said she thinks the cub’s an Alpha.”

“Is that worrying you?” Hannibal tried to keep his amusement out of his voice. He’d been trying for months to encourage Randall to open up a bit more about his anxieties and sounding like he was making fun of him would just shut him down again.

“No, but do you think it is?”

“Yes.” Hannibal couldn’t help smiling.

“She said she could tell because we’re always, you know... and then Dr DuMaurier said it makes the cub like... bigger.”

Hannibal had to bite the inside of his cheeks to keep a neutral expression. He kept silent to let the omega get to his question.

“Is that what you think too?”

“It’s a theory I’ve heard. I don’t know if it’s true or not.”

“So is that why you want to all the time? I mean the main reason...”

“No, of course it isn’t.” Feeling the pup tense up with embarrassment and realising that had come out a bit more directly than he’d intended, Hannibal pulled him around so he could see his face better.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I quite enjoy mounting you. I enjoy all the time we spend together but I love the way you feel under me, when I’m inside you. Why wouldn’t I want to do that all the time?”

“I dunno. Nevermind. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. If it’s something you’re worried about, I’m very glad you asked me. And if you’re worried that my only concern is for the cub, that’s the furthest thing from the truth.

Bringing you and your brother home has been the best thing I've ever done and the cub is just the frosting on the cake. It doesn't make the cake any less delicious."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," Hannibal replied and then kissed him deeply until the omega was panting.

"Sorry," he said again when they broke apart looking down.

"You don't need to be sorry about how you feel," Hannibal said. "I'm very proud of you for coming to talk to me about it. I know it's difficult for you. And I hope you know you'll never be in trouble for being honest with me."

Randall just blushed in response and buried himself back in the Alpha's chest.

"Can I ask you a question in return?"

The omega nodded and mumbled, "Okay."

"You know I've given Will a choice, when he grows up, to mate with me if he wants to."

"Yes, he said."

"Would you feel upset if I had another bond with someone else? Knowing that it would never change or affect the way that I feel about you."

"No. I don't want Will to go live somewhere else."

"And you know it was totally normal in the past for Alphas to have bonds with several omegas and betas. That that made their pack stronger and let them all take care of each other better."

"Yes." There was a little tension but he didn't seem to be outright rejecting the idea.

"And I think, given the current situation, that an arrangement like that might make more sense for all of us. That our family will be stronger if I formalise those bonds. But I don't want you to worry that it will take anything away from what we have."

"Just more frosting?"

"Just more frosting," Hannibal said leaning over to kiss him again.

"Who do you want to bond with?"

"With Abigail. She doesn't have any other family left, she knows a lot of valuable survival skills and she gets along well with everyone. I think it would be good for her to have a stronger attachment to our pack. I think she gets lonely sometimes."

"Okay," Randall said turning around to face him again. "She's okay."

“Good pup,” Hannibal said giving him another kiss. “It makes me very happy to hear you say that.”

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While Randall seemed to have accepted the proposition in the abstract, Hannibal could tell he was a lot more reluctant to come down to the basement and talk to Abigail about it directly.

“We should begin as we mean to go on,” he explained to the omega. “No burying our heads in the sand and no pretending something doesn’t bother us when it does.”

Abigail was sitting bolt upright on the edge of the bed when they walked in. Her eyes followed Randall who went to sit in one of the chairs in the corner as far away from her as he could manage and without looking up.

Hannibal went to sit next to him and signalled Abigail to come join them. It would be less fraught if they were all sitting at the same level in comparatively neutral territory.

“I’ve spoken with Randall, Abigail, about the potential of you joining our family with a more formal bond and he’s agreed that would be a good idea.”

Hannibal paused to let Randall speak for himself.

“Yes,” the omega added after a brief hesitation. “If you want to.”

Abigail was blushing a deep crimson but nodded and replied, “Yes, I really want to. But I don’t want to get in the way of anything.”

“You won’t,” Hannibal responded. “But I think we should talk first about what we need and what we expect. So there’s no hurt feelings or misunderstandings later.”

They both nodded so he continued.

“For example, I expect if you’re bonded to me, you’re bonded only to me Abigail. You can end the relationship any time you want if you come and talk to me about it, but I won’t tolerate any form of romantic or sexual relationship with anyone else while we’re bonded.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “I don’t want anyone else.”

“I also expect everyone in the family to treat each other with respect. If you feel jealous or upset about something, you come and talk to me about it. You don’t take things out on each other. And once I settle a dispute, I expect you to abide by my decision.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Randall responded and Abigail nodded after him.

“Is there anything you want to add or discuss?”

He could see both of them trying to think frantically.

“Not...” Randall started but then seemed unsure how to continue. “Can I have...”

“What’s that pup?”

“I don’t want to in the same bedroom. I mean I only want... or I mean I don’t want other people in my... your bedroom. For the sex part.”

“You don’t want me to have sex with anyone else in my bedroom?” Hannibal clarified. He supposed it wasn’t unusual for omegas to get a little territorial but it was potentially slightly inconvenient to have Randall staking a claim on his room. If he’d been planning things better from the beginning, he would have tried to get Randall to nest in a different room but he supposed there was no going back at this stage.

“I’m fine with that,” Abigail added quickly. “I want my own bedroom off limits too. And if I don’t feel like it, I don’t have to.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said starting to become slightly alarmed at the direction this was heading. “Nothing about this implies an obligation to have sex. You can always say no or that you don’t feel like it. Both of you. I won’t be offended and I would never punish you for not being in the mood.”

“So do we have a schedule or something?” Abigail asked.

“I’d rather not,” Hannibal replied. “Unless it’s something you feel like you need.” Randall shook his head no and Abigail shrugged. “If either of you feel like you’re not getting enough of what you need, I’d prefer you just come and talk to me about it.”

“The first time I bond with you, Abigail, I need to come in you for the bond to take hold. But until Randall whelps, I’m only going to come in him – for the cub’s health. After he gives birth, he’s going to need a few months to recover so I can spend more time with you during that period. I don’t think a schedule is necessary, but there are going to be times when it makes sense for me to focus more on one or the other of you. And you can decide, Abigail, if you want to wait to bond until after the cub in born, or we can bond once now and then wait.”

“Now,” Abigail said. “I want to, or I’d rather now. And then I can wait. I don’t mind. Obviously, the cub is the most important thing.”

“Okay, Randall?”

The pup nodded.

“Do you want to stay and help? You don’t have to. It’s up to you.”

The omega turned bright red but then asked, “Would it bother you?”

Abigail had to think for a moment before saying, “I guess not. We can try it. If it gets weird, can I change my mind?”

“Of course,” Hannibal reassured them. “We can stop or make adjustments any time you want.”

“Okay then, what do I do?”

“Take your clothes off and lie down on the bed,” Hannibal let a little command bleed into his voice now that the negotiations were over and was gratified to see the beta hop to it immediately.

“You too, pup,” he said standing and beginning to undress himself. Randall was a little more hesitant but eventually pulled his clothes off and then stood next to the bed as if unsure what to do.

Abigail was lying on her back. She’d taken everything off except the scarf around her neck.

Hannibal took a moment to devise his plan of action. As a teenager in his room at boarding school late at night his number one go-to fantasy was having a stable full of omegas. He’d walk down the aisle and choose two or three to service him for the night, then line them up on the bed and mount them until they were begging for mercy. Their bellies would swell and round on the spot and as he led them back to their stalls for the night all the other boys would see them and know how satisfied and well-kept they were.

In reality, he suspected being made to wait their turn before being brutally taken would just feed Abigail and Randall’s insecurities and make them second guess the progress he’d made with them. So Plan B needed to keep everyone engaged.

He guided Randall over until he was lying on his side next to Abigail and then showed him how to lick at and then gently suck her breasts. Meanwhile he kissed her again, taking short breaks while she gasped to nuzzle at the scarf around her neck.

She was clearly still a little self-conscious about the scar but didn’t need to be. Hannibal gently tugged the scarf loose, poked a finger into it and then reached down to rub the silk into her cleft. He put just enough pressure on her hole to hold it in place and then withdrew his hand.

“Does that feel nice?” he asked her worrying her other nipple briefly while she arched and groaned.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to help Randall feel nice too?”

She nodded enthusiastically with her eyes closed. Hannibal guided her hand down under the omega’s belly and wrapped it around his pseudocock.

“Just pull gently or he’ll get too excited. Can you wait until I say so, pup?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Good boy.” Hannibal reached around and gave the omega’s hole a firm rub using the slick to coat his cock. He could feel with his other hand that Abigail was producing her own slick but he couldn’t be too careful since it was her first time.

He started to rub at her sensitive little button and slide his finger deeper and deeper into her hole. He would need to stretch her a bit more carefully. She wasn’t designed to take an Alpha

cock the way the omega was and he wouldn't be able to use a mating bite at the end to relieve any discomfort.

Abigail was impatient and kept hitching her hips up trying to get his fingers in deeper. He held her belly down and said, "All in good time, lamb. There's no rush."

He pulled his fingers back at the same time and licked her insistently. She tasted a bit like rabbit and her thighs quivered around his ears like bowstrings. She kept trying to bring her legs back together while she moaned and gripped at the sheets.

Hannibal tried three fingers and found that they slid in without resistance and brought a long trail of slick after them when he pulled them out. Spreading her legs further apart and settling more insistently between them he began to slide his cock into her.

She was tighter than an omega but wouldn't be able to take him as deeply. He couldn't knot her but should still be able to work up enough stimulation to come.

When he was in about as far as he thought he could go, he leaned forward to kiss her again and ask if she was still okay. She had scrunched her face up like she was concentrating on a difficult math problem and was breathing too shallowly for him to see.

"Yes, yes. God. It's just really big," she said letting her breath go and then opening her eyes while she kissed him back.

As he started to thrust, he reached over to finger Randall's hole in time, not wanting him to feel left out. The omega continued to suck at Abigail's breasts while being stroked from both ends and seemed almost too blissed out to know where he was.

When his knot started to form, he reached Randall's hand over to provide some pressure on it. The omega knew how much he liked from long practice.

Abigail gave a sudden squeal and started rolling back and forth with her passage clenching tight around him and the next thing he knew Hannibal's claim was releasing into her. Her hand was also squeezing around Randall and Hannibal drove his fingers deeper against the omega's sensitive channel until he was coming as well.

Hannibal lowered himself gently to give her another kiss while her release was still pulsing around him. Randall rolled over onto his back with his eyes closed smiling and Hannibal could see a little footprint circling around under the skin of his belly. If he saw it a thousand times, it would never stop looking alien and bizarre and wonderful to him.

Without a full knot holding it in place, his cock started to soften after a minute or so and he pulled out of her with a happy mumble and another series of kisses across her collar bones and neck.

"Welcome to the family," he said as her bright blue eyes met his and she smiled up at him.

# Reunification

“Dr Lecter!” the familiar voice crawled up his spine. “I knew you’d find me!”

Just when he thought the expedition couldn’t be more of a disaster, of course it got worse. All Hannibal wanted was an ultrasound machine, a fetal heart monitor and some other equipment for the delivery and here he was boxed in to the hospital cafeteria, surrounded by infected, with Franklyn Froideveaux waving frantically at him through the service hatch into the kitchen.

“Franklyn,” he responded while Alana, Katz and Price continued shifting tables to block the doors. “Whatever are you doing here?”

“Well,” Franklyn replied. “After our little ‘misunderstanding’, I started seeing Dr. Vogel upstairs and, I know she’s an omega specialist but I had to schedule an emergency session with her because the pills she was prescribing weren’t anywhere near as effective as what you gave me and I wanted to switch back so I tried taking both but the side effects were making me really sleepy and craving just bonkers stuff like string cheese dipped in peanut butter and then when I got here everyone just started going crazy and then the quarantine started so the cops wouldn’t let me leave and I swear they were all eating each other out there and there was no other way out, so I hid in the kitchen storeroom and hoped they’d all just go away but there must be thousands of them out there now and they can’t get out but I knew if I just managed to hang in there a little longer, someone would come and find me. And here you are!”

“I wouldn’t get too excited,” Katz told him. “We still have to get out of here ourselves.”

Franklyn came around and opened the door from the kitchen into the cafeteria. The pudgy omega started crying and wrapped himself around Hannibal’s chest as soon as he was through the door. “I’m just so happy to see you’re alive! You can’t imagine what these past months have been like for me. All on my own... the wolf at the door.”

“Have you seen anyone else alive, Franklyn?” Alana asked.

“The transplant surgeon, Dr Gideon. He fought his way in and killed the rest of those things in the cafeteria and the kitchen. He was in here for a few days while his injuries healed – one of them almost tore his leg off - and then he took a bunch of food and left to go find his omega and their cubs. He wanted me to go with him but I thought it would be safer here. That was months ago though. He must not have made it out. I’m sure if he did, he would have tried to send help. Oh, I can’t tell you how relieved I am to finally have an Alpha again!”

“I’m not your Alpha, Franklyn, I’m your ex-therapist.”

“So how are we getting out of here?” Price interrupted. Hannibal could have kissed the pushy beta for changing the subject.

“I hate hospitals,” Katz added. “All the corridors look the same.”

“We’re still on level 2 though,” Alana said. “We didn’t go up or down any stairs. We just need to get back to the sky bridge somehow.”

“What level is obstetrics?” Hannibal asked.

“10,” Alana snapped. “And all the elevators are out. And with all these things everywhere there’s no chance we get an ultrasound machine and all the other equipment down eight flights of stairs. Which is why I said we should have tried the Omega Institute in the first place.”

“Okay, okay,” Katz replied. “Let’s just focus on getting out of here in one piece.”

“Well, the corridor we came down is blocked,” Hannibal offered. Katz wanted to try out her new flamethrower but probably should have tested it in a confined space first. The flames slowed the infected down but didn’t kill them and meanwhile they set everything else around them on fire.

“Jumping out the window probably wouldn’t outright kill us,” Price added. “But I don’t fancy trying to outrun all those zombies down there on the street for three blocks on broken legs.”

“So we keep going down the corridor and hope it loops back around at some point...” Katz concluded.

Having made up their minds, Hannibal, Price and Katz cleared all the zombies reaching in the broken hallway window they had climbed through while Alana helped Franklyn pack up his things and the last of the edible food in the storeroom.

When they were done, they shifted the tables away from the doors and ran out swinging. There were dozens of infected lurching around in the corridor and they could hear more rattling behind every door they passed.

At the end of the passageway it widened out into a waiting room, also full of infected. While Hannibal and Katz beheaded them left and right, Alana and Price shifted the couches to block the corridor so more couldn’t follow. Franklyn stood bewildered in the center of the room screaming and attracting more of them until Price clamped a hand over his mouth.

The next corridor was a little less crowded but they could still see infected clawing at the windows of all the patient rooms as they ran past.

“The hell...” Katz said coming to a halt in front of one of the windows. Stopping next to her Hannibal could see that the zombie staring back at them had a mop of corkscrewing red hair mostly covering her face.

“Is that Freddie Lounds?” Katz asked as the zombie ripped at the curtain and scraped her filthy, cracked nails along the glass to get at them.

“We should leave her,” Hannibal said mindful that Franklyn’s continuous high-pitched whining was going to start bringing more infected down on them any second.

“Just a second,” Katz said before throwing open the door and thrusting her katana straight into the former journalist’s chest. The sword also severed the strap of the messenger bag she had slung over one shoulder.

The zombie lurched forward at Katz but went still before she could reach her. Katz let her fall to the floor and then grabbed the bag.

“She was a pain in the ass but she didn’t deserve this... and who knows what she was working on,” Katz explained as she jumped over the body and then jogged back into the hall. “Maybe there’s something interesting.”

At the end of the corridor, they cut through the staff break room and showers and then some labs. Finally, they found a sign for the sky bridge and raced towards it. A large number of infected had been attracted by the fires further down the corridor so the entrance to the bridge itself was relatively clear.

They ran down the bridge to the midway point where they had climbed in through a broken window pane and then jumped down to the roof of the RV below it. Franklyn didn’t want to go but a firm push from Hannibal did the trick just before the crowds of pursing infected reached them.

Franklyn and Hannibal were still clinging to the roof as Price started to drive them away. He stopped when they were several blocks away and there was no more risk of the infected dropping onto the roof so that they could climb back in.

“Well,” Katz said as they strapped in and headed home, “let’s never try that again.”

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“So the whole trip was a bust?” Jack asked as they filed back into the dining room. “I guess it’s not the end of the world. But I was hoping it would be easier than trying to punch through all the way to the Omega Institute.” Avoiding the highways, it was well over an hour’s drive each way on dangerous roads they hadn’t scouted out before.

“Not a complete bust,” Bev replied holding up the bag. “Our friend Freddie Lounds was there, infected, with a bag full of lab notes she stole from our favorite gastrophysiologist. It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if she was Patient Zero.”

“Well, if the end of the world was going to have an upside, that’s probably not a bad one,” Zeller added.

“Fantastic Doctor, have a read through of them and let us know if you find anything new.” Hannibal smirked that even in the present circumstances, Jack couldn’t help snapping orders at the betas.

“And they rescued me,” Franklyn said coming around from behind Hannibal to offer his hand to Jack. He actually simpered when Jack shook it.

“Who’s this?” Jack asked looking around.

“This is Franklyn Froideveaux, an old acquaintance of mine we found trapped at the hospital.”

“Very old. We go way back. We both love opera... and cheese. I love all these little planters. Is that French or Russian tarragon?”

“Well, if you’re old acquaintances, maybe Franklyn should spend his quarantine period here?” Hannibal could have throttled Jack as the other Alpha turned to address the omega directly. “For health and security reasons, we usually have a three- or four- day quarantine period and then an interview process before new people join our group.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Franklyn replied. “I’m feeling fit as a fiddle now that I’m out of that hellhole. Well except for my plantar fasciitis. But you won’t even know I’m here. I swear.”

“I think it defeats the purpose of a quarantine if he stays in the main house though,” Hannibal countered. “It increases the risk, the more people he’s exposed to.”

“Bedelia’s house it is then,” Jack decided knowing that the other Alpha was on watch and wouldn’t be able to object. “Can you let her know, Price? And if you’ll just come along with me, Franklyn, we’ll get you all set up. You must be hungry.”

“But... yes.. don’t you think...” Franklyn continued scrambling for an excuse not to leave. Jack took his upper arm and guided him firmly out of the room, in very small part making up for his earlier needling.

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Once dinner was prepared, Hannibal went to find his omegas. They were in the gym with Alana who was starting Lamaze training with Randall.

Standing in the doorway, he was treated to the delicious sight of the backsides of the beta doctor and his mate on all fours next to each other. Randall was leaning his arms against a giant inflatable exercise ball and was supposed to be practicing deep inhales with sharp panting exhales along with Alana but he kept getting confused and coughing instead.

Meanwhile Will was sitting on top of the ball and bouncing happily, dangling a toy on a string for the dogs the chase at his feet.

“I know you can do this, Randall,” Alana encouraged. “Just don’t overthink it.”

“That won’t be the problem,” Will teased. A second later, he squawked as Randall shoved him off the ball and he crashed onto his backside on the floor with a resounding thud. The puppies scrambled and both Randall and Alana looked up alarmed until Will started laughing with his whole body.

Hannibal debated whether or not to intervene but decided to let it go. The pups did sometimes engage in mild teasing and roughhousing as a bonding mechanism and it rarely resulted in injury or even hurt feelings. Will was unharmed – to the contrary seemed happier and more relaxed than usual – and Alana seemed to have things under control.

And Hannibal was also aware that the earlier sight of the omega and beta essentially presenting for him had brought his cock up to attention in a way that made it awkward to charge into the scene and be taken seriously as he started laying down the law.

Alana told Will to go sit on the exercise bench and refrain from further comment unless he wanted to be sent to his room for the remainder of the lesson. Will went with only a show of sulking and then immediately immersed himself in training the dogs to fetch.

Meanwhile Alana guided Randall until he was leaning on the ball again and refocused on his breathing.

The little huffing noises he was making along with the swaying of his belly and the shimmying of his sumptuous ass had almost convinced Hannibal to send Alana and Will about their business when he realised that Franklyn was standing right next to him staring directly at the tent in his trousers.

“You should be resting at Dr DuMaurier’s,” Hannibal observed placidly, refusing to let an insignificant gnat like Franklyn Froideveaux cause him to lose his composure.

“I tried,” the chubby omega whined. “It’s just so quiet over there. Not that I mind after all the excitement. But surely isolation is the worst thing we can do for my PTSD.”

“The quarantine is not really intended as a form of therapy, Franklyn. It’s to protect the health of the people already living here.” For emphasis, Hannibal moved to partially block the door to the gym and to direct Franklyn down the hall with one arm.

“Is that Agent Crawford’s omega? Wow, not just a bun in the oven – that’s the whole loaf!”

Distracted by the conversation, Randall and Will were now standing next to each other watching them. Hostility poured off the older omega and he was all but snarling at the intruder. Hannibal felt a little flash of bemused pride at his usually easygoing omega getting possessive.

“Actually that’s my omega,” Hannibal told him. “But these are not the best circumstances for introductions.”

“Really!” Franklyn exclaimed gulping awkwardly. “Really! That’s great. I can’t believe you didn’t mention it in any of our sessions.” The omega gave a slightly hysterical laugh and then waved at the two brothers under Hannibal’s outstretched arm.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Hannibal told him, letting some Alpha into his voice. He usually refrained around Franklyn to avoid giving him mixed signals but it had been a long day and he wanted the omega out of his sight so he could eat and enjoy some time with his family. “I will take you back to Dr DuMaurier’s house and you will stay there until we are ready to interview you and make decisions about a permanent arrangement.”

Hannibal took Franklyn firmly by the elbow and led him towards the stairs.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” Franklyn called back over his shoulder but the omegas, no longer in view, did not reply.

# Negotiation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Force of habit drove Alana to park the RV in her old space outside the Omega Institute. Looking up at the grey edifice of the reception building now, it was hard to believe she'd spent most of the last ten years of her life there. The absence of any sign of infected in the front drive or garden made everything seem eerily normal as she walked with Hannibal and Jack up to the front door. Zeller stayed behind to guard the RV.

She was almost tempted to ring the doorbell but then remembered that the noise would only attract any of the infected inside. The thought made her start to regret her insistence on coming. It was only because she knew the layout of the Institute better than any of the rest of them, but Hannibal had been there several times and knew where the medical bay was and what equipment they would need for the delivery.

Alana realised that there were potentially hundreds of former omega patients of hers inside – pups she had treated for stomach-aches and sunburns and sore backsides, half grown cubs who would sometimes fake illnesses to get out of classes they didn't like, or because they just wanted to chat or get an extra hug. They'd barely even started their lives and had never hurt anyone and definitely didn't deserve whatever had happened to them on the other side of that door.

"Let's just get this over with," she told Hannibal who had come up beside her and had a hand hovering near her shoulder blade as if unsure whether to let it rest or not.

Jack turned the knob and gave a little push on the door but it met resistance almost immediately. It was unlocked but something had been piled up behind it.

"There must be survivors," Jack whispered now drawing his gun. "Or there were at some point."

They all stepped back a little from the door to take a closer look at the windows. There was no obvious movement but then suddenly a bewildered voice from one of the second story windows called out, "Dr Bloom?"

"Frederick?" Of course he was still alive. The man was a human cockroach. But Alana was so relieved to see another living being she couldn't even hold onto her contempt.

There was a short almost hysterical laugh of relief and then the window slid open and director's face came into view. He'd grown a beard which only partially covered some ugly scarring on his left cheek and neck and he was wearing white surgical scrubs instead of his usual suit and tie but otherwise he looked much the same as he had when he was her employer.

"Who's that with you?"

“You know Dr Lecter, and this is Agent Crawford from the FBI.”

“Oh yes, of course. Agent Crawford and I met at the opening of the Evil Minds exhibit. You’ll recall we discussed possibly incorporating some findings from a paper I’d been working on... about omegan defense mechanisms in response to threat behaviour.”

“Yes, of course. Dr. Hinton.”

“Chilton.”

“Right, well perhaps we could reminisce about old times somewhere a little more comfortable...”

The beta started slightly at the suggestion, his eyes shifting to the ground and then to look behind him.

“Why don’t you come around to the staff entrance,” he called back finally. “I just need to have a quick discussion with my colleagues.”

“How many of you are in there?” Jack started to call but Frederick had already disappeared pulling the window shut behind him.

“This is a terrible idea,” Jack muttered to himself as they walked around to the side of the building. As they passed the RV again, he signalled Zeller to cover them at a distance with his rifle.

They stopped at the staff entrance and waited for at least ten minutes as a light drizzle dampened their hair and clothes. There were no sounds or movements from inside the building to indicate how many people were inside or what they doing.

Finally the door opened with a decisive clang and Tobias Budge stepped through it flanked on one side by Dr Chilton and on the other by the new guard – Matthew something – with his creepy bowl cut hair. The guard shut the door behind them once they were through so they couldn’t see any further into the Institute and stood beside it with one hand on the door knob and the other on a tranquilizer gun at his side.

“Dr Bloom, Dr Lecter, Agent Crawford,” Tobias greeted each of them with a slight nod but without raising his hand. “It’s very nice to see you.”

The music teacher smelled different – an obvious Alpha musk that had both Jack’s and Hannibal’s hackles all but visibly rising.

“You’re an Alpha now,” Alana observed flatly.

“Oh, I was always an Alpha. I just used scent blockers to get around some of the more discriminatory hiring practices in our industry. People assume that just because you’re an Alpha, you’re incapable of self-control. So few people can see past superficial characteristics or understand how what would seem like disadvantage can actually be a source of immense strength.” As he spoke, Tobias never broke eye contact with Hannibal talking right over

Alana's head. For all of Hannibal's impassive expression, Alana couldn't shake the impression that he was seconds away from lunging at the other Alpha.

"Well," Dr Chilton jumped in nervously. "What can we do for you today?"

"Dr Bloom was hoping to retrieve some of her medical equipment," Jack explained.

"That would be the Institute's medical equipment," Dr Chilton corrected smarmily.

"Well maybe we could trade it for something then," Alana supplied.

"What exactly do you need?" Tobias asked cocking his head slightly and still looking directly at Hannibal.

"An ultrasound machine, fetal heart monitor and a delivery kit," Hannibal replied meeting his gaze.

"Well, you obviously didn't waste any time," Frederick said with a sharp laugh and an aborted attempt to clap Hannibal on the back. He withered under Tobias's stare and stepped back behind him.

"There are a number of us living in a secure location in the city together," Jack explained. "We could consider letting you join us. Obviously at a time like this, there's greater safety in numbers. I don't know how many more of you are in there..."

"We're quite safe here," Tobias replied tilting his head to regard Jack now. "We have everything we need and no desire to move into the city."

"Well, we've scavenged quite a bit," Alana added. "Are you sure there isn't anything you need? Even if we don't have it, we can try to get it for you."

Tobias considered for a few moments ignoring Dr Chilton flaring his eyes and tilting his head towards the door in an effort to get his attention.

"All right," the teacher said finally. "The equipment you want is probably quite rare now and hard to acquire. I imagine that the hospitals are some of the hardest sites to scavenge in."

After a long pause, Jack nodded.

"So I think a fair exchange would be the medical equipment for one of your omegas."

"What's that?" Jack asked raising one hand to his ear. Beside him Hannibal's eyes had gone dark and shark-like.

"One of your omegas. You don't need two. And obviously at least one of them is already productive. You can keep that one and we'll take the other one."

"Don't you already have an entire basement full of omegas?" Hannibal asked. His tone was mild but he stepped a little further away from Jack to slightly flank Tobias and leave more clearance around his right arm.

“Sadly, none of them survived.” Dr Chilton replied almost wistfully. “And you’re the first hint of other survivors we’ve had since the FEMA trucks stopped coming.”

“I think you know what our response is going to be,” Hannibal said after a long pause.

“Perhaps,” Tobias replied. “But you should reconsider. There’s nothing else that we need or want and we’re well prepared to defend what we do have I assure you. These aren’t circumstances under which any of us can afford to be greedy... or sentimental.”

Smirking the Alpha teacher turned on his heels Chilton following close behind mouthing his apologies back at them. Matthew opened the door and then disappeared after them into the building.

Back in the RV, Jack let out an irritated growl while Hannibal grew even more silent.

“Are you sure we can’t just take them out?” Zeller offered. “There’s only three of them.”

“There could be more inside,” Jack rubbed his fingers through his hair in frustration. “And we can’t just massacre what are potentially some of the few remaining humans just because they have something we want and won’t give it to us.”

“We’ll just have to try another hospital,” Alana said bleakly resting a hand on Hannibal’s knee. “Or make do. I know it’s not ideal, but omegas were having cubs long before the advent of modern medicine.”

“It will be safer for both Randall and the cub if we have the right equipment particularly if there are any complications,” Hannibal responded. “It’s not a risk I want to take if there is any opportunity to reduce it. Obviously Tobias is not prepared to be reasonable so we will simply have to come up with another plan.”

With that he moved to the bench seat on the other side of the RV and stared out the window for the rest of the trip home. Alana gave him his space, silently cursing her former colleagues and frustrated that there didn’t seem to be anything she could do to help. Of all the people to survive at the Institute, it had to be the three least deserving ones.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the shortish update - lots of stuff that was going to be in this chapter all decided it wanted to be in the next chapter instead. Hope you enjoy anyway.

# Realisation

“It’s just not fair!” Franklyn wailed before copiously blowing his nose into a crinkled-up tissue.

“Franklyn,” Hannibal began patiently holding up the box again. “I don’t want you to take this personally.”

“How can I not take it personally!” Franklyn threw his hands in the air and the tissue went flying to the herb rack already forgotten by everyone but Hannibal. “It’s the end of the world. I’m literally one of the only omegas left on earth and I still can’t find anyone to claim me. The entire human species would rather go extinct...”

“I don’t think catastrophising is going to help,” Bedelia offered, rubbing Franklyn’s shoulder.

“I mean another omega... fine. But you’re choosing that beta girl over me as well! What can you two possibly have in common?”

“What beta girl is that?” Alana jumped in before Hannibal could change the subject.

“The one with the scar on her neck! I saw them making out in his office this morning!”

“And how did you see that Franklyn, when we asked you to respect the quarantine and stay at Bedelia’s house until your interview?” Hannibal ignored the daggers that Alana was now staring at him. He’d have to face her wrath once the interview was over.

“So I got a little bored and curious...”

“That’s a perfect example, Franklyn, of why we can’t invite you to join our group. We need to be able to trust that everyone who lives here will put the best interests of the community first and will do what we ask them to do.” Bedelia spoke softly but firmly to the overwrought omega.

“But you can trust me! I promise! I’ll do anything. Just give me a chance to prove it!”

Hannibal considered Franklyn while Alana responded.

“We’re not throwing you out on the street, Franklyn. We can help you find somewhere safe to stay.”

“On my own!” he exclaimed throwing his hands into the air, shuddering and sobbing again. “I wouldn’t last a day. I wouldn’t want to. I’d rather you just kill me now.”

“Or we could take you to the Omega Institute,” Hannibal suggested. “There are some other survivors there, even an Alpha. I’m sure they would be happy to have you.”

“But I don’t want some random Alpha. What if he winds up being a psychopath? Please just give me one more chance to prove what a great addition I could be. What do you need? I’d

do anything to help."

There was a long pause as Hannibal considered their options.

"There is something you might be able to help us with, Franklyn. But it would be dangerous."

"It doesn't matter. Danger is my middle name. Or, you know, whatever it is, I'll do it."

"You might want to hear what it is first," Bedelia advised giving Hannibal a searching look.

"The Alpha at the Omega Institute has some equipment that we need. But he will only trade it to us in exchange for an omega."

"Okay but then wouldn't I just end up living there?"

"Not necessarily. The other Alpha doesn't know where we live. So once we drove away with the equipment, you could escape. We could leave a cache of supplies for you and a radio so you could contact us once you were free and we would come and pick you up again."

Franklyn had gone wider eyed with each sentence until he looked like he was about to pop a vein.

"And that's the only way you would reconsider?"

"That's the only way I can think of that you could prove that you'll put our community ahead of your own needs. You would be contributing significantly by helping us get some urgently needed equipment, scouting out how many people are still alive at the Omega Institute and showing what a valuable member of the group you would be."

"And none of the rest of you have any other ideas?"

Jack, Bedelia and Alana shook their heads no.

Franklyn gulped, his eyes shifting along the edge of the dining room table. "And you absolutely promise that you would come and find me again afterwards?"

"I give you my word," Hannibal told him holding him a steady gaze.

"Okay," Franklyn moaned. "If it's the only way, okay, I'll do it."

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It took the better part of a week to coach Franklyn on how he should behave, teach him the layout of the Institute, show him the best escape route and deposit a cache of supplies for him without being detected by anyone. Franklyn was supposed to stay at Bedelia's in the meantime but was constantly getting underfoot at the main house.

Alana had thrown a fit about Abigail – her usual mix of overprotectiveness with just a hint of jealousy - and was barely speaking to either of them. Franklyn took every opportunity to

aggravate both Abigail and Randall, who was going berserk with nesting hormones and started snarling just from the sound of Franklyn's voice in another room.

By the end of it, Hannibal was exhausted and tempted to just carve the pudgy omega up and call it a day. But Randall's due date was only a few weeks off. There wasn't time to plan an expedition to another hospital and Hannibal was determined that the delivery of his first cub was going to be flawless and as low stress as possible for everyone involved.

As much as he loved seeing his omega round and blooming, well-fed, hair shining, just a little bit lazy but content, he really couldn't wait to meet his cub and get started on their life together. Every time he thought about it, all his other worries melted away.

They were meant to leave for the Omega Institute in an hour or so and Franklyn's nerves meant he was clinging limpet-like to Hannibal's side. The Alpha had only managed to lose him by pretending he needed to use the bathroom and then texting Abigail and Jack to distract the omega by going over the plans again so he could have some time to compose himself. He was going to need to be at the top of his game to convince Tobias to accept Franklyn when it was obvious he really wanted Will.

Speaking of which, Hannibal flicked on the surveillance app on his phone to check on the younger omega. He was feeling somewhat guilty for not spending enough time with the pup lately but it was hard to find enough hours in the day with everything else going on. Once the cub was whelped and they'd settled into a routine, he would have to try to find some more things they could do together. Will was always talking about how much he missed fishing. Maybe, with enough of them for protection, and as a very special, almost never to be repeated treat, Hannibal might be able to take him out for a few hours on one of the boats in the bay. He missed fish (other than tuna) himself and wanted to make sure to incorporate lots of omega 3s into the cub's diet.

At the moment, Will was in the lab with Katz sitting on one of the stools swinging his legs on one side of the bench while the beta read Dr Bevier's papers and scratched her own notes in a separate book.

They both started and went silent when they heard a noise in the corridor.

"Is that Franklyn?" Will whispered looking seconds away from diving into one of the cabinets to hide.

"I don't think so kiddo," Katz whispered back.

They both heaved a sigh of relief when Max wandered in and settled under Will's chair.

"How do you think he survived?" Will asked, reaching down to scratch the dog's head. "I mean... you know... He's not exactly Bear Grylls."

"Still not sure," Katz told him. "See... over here I'm testing some of the pills he's been taking to find out what's in them. I should have the results in a bit. Dr Bevier's notes suggest he was researching some kind of antidote to a new disease. I don't think he caused the disease itself.

He was testing how human gastric enzymes interact with other substances to synthesize different compounds that could block the prions. He came up with this compound – GJH-63."

Katz reached over to show some of the papers to Will who looked a little confused but fascinated.

"I tested some of Stammets' mushrooms and they have the same compound. And maybe Franklyn's pills as well? But I can't figure out what substance Dr Bevier was using to create it in the first place. He doesn't seem to have recorded it in any of the notes we have here... I guess I'll have to try to talk Jack into taking us back to the lab again to see if we can find anything else."

"Is GJH like Abigail's dad?" Will offered squinting at the papers. "Garret Jacob Hobbs?"

"Holy shit!" Katz shouted before realising who she was talking to and clapping a hand over her mouth. "Sorry, kid. You didn't hear that. But I bet it is. Can't believe I didn't catch that myself." She raised her hand to give the omega a high five but his face was still buried in the notes.

"What kind of meat was he giving them?"

"Deer. But from the state parks. I wonder where he was hunting them. Maybe there's something in the soil that transfers into the mushrooms and whatever the deer were eating..."

"Do you think Abigail would know?"

"It wouldn't hurt to ask her. Why don't you go see? Meanwhile I'll try to figure out what's in these pills..."

"Why don't you just ask Hannibal? He prescribed them."

"Because that's not half as much fun as science," Katz replied with a wink mussing up the omega's hair and then rolling over to look through her microscope.

Hannibal switched off the app and strode quickly downstairs to intercept the omega. He knew Abigail was on watch so Will wouldn't be able to ask her anything for several hours but he wanted to get the pup away from the beta before he talked to her just to be safe. She hadn't quite put two and two together but she wasn't far off. He needed to get rid of some of the evidence before he was forced to get rid of her. That was likely to cause all kinds of unfortunate consequences.

He ran into Will in the kitchen. It was easy enough to convince the pup to drink some orange juice because he'd been coughing earlier in the day and to spike the juice with a mild hypnotic. When Will began to doze off, Hannibal caught him before he could fall off his stool and carried him up to the guest bedroom. Checking that Randall was also asleep and out of harm's way, Hannibal headed back for the basement.

The plan was to distract Katz in the lab – perhaps saying that Jack was looking for her - and then try to find some way to destroy Franklyn's pills and/or the lab notes before the results

came back without looking too conspicuous.

At the bottom of the stairs, however, Hannibal felt the familiar chilly draft from the freezers. The doors were wide open. Stepping to the threshold, he could see Katz inside intently gathering samples from several shelves at the back.

“Hannibal,” Alana called from the top of the stairs. “We’re all waiting for you in the RV.”

Katz’s face shot up at the sound and her eyes went wide the second she saw him. She knew. It was a nuisance. He actually liked her and she was generally useful. He had even considered bonding with her but of course it was impossible now. She would be heading straight for Jack with the news that they had caught the Chesapeake Ripper after all.

Hannibal slammed the freezer door shut as she dove for it, just managing to get the latches in place before she reached him. She would have slammed into the door with all her weight at the rate she was going but with all the soundproofing he couldn’t hear anything.

“Coming,” he called up to Alana as he pulled out his phone to adjust the temperature.

# Reciprocation

Hannibal clipped Franklyn's lead in place and stepped down from the RV. He lifted one hand over his eyes to shield them from the bright sun, but the reflection off the asphalt was nearly as bad. There was no movement that he could see in any of the windows of the Institute and no other signs of how many people might be inside. It was enough to keep the perimeter clear of infected and keep the lawns in the front garden mowed in any case.

Franklyn followed him out, gazing around in all directions but still generally managing to maintain his pacing. Alana and Price came behind him and Zeller stayed in the RV to cover them.

They were met at the staff entrance again by Tobias and Matthew. They could see Chilton through the door and he gave a little wave before Matthew closed it behind him.

Hannibal signalled Franklyn to get in the display position and the omega managed to drop to his knees with a reasonable amount of grace. It wasn't the best position for him – emphasising his gut and making the trembling in his hands and legs more obvious – but at least the protocol would remind him to stay silent.

"That's not your omega," Tobias said, visibly peeved but not to the point of heading straight back through the door. It was a start anyway.

"He's an omega. You agreed to trade the medical equipment for one."

"The other one," Tobias insisted with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"The other one is largely untrained and is too young to be claimed for four or five more years. Franklyn here graduated from the Georgetown Omega Institute. His family spared no expense for his education."

"And how did you acquire him?"

"He's a patient of mine. We had a session just before the quarantine was announced." Franklyn gave a tiny start at that and Hannibal ran a hand through the omega's curls to steady him and remind him to be quiet. It was everything he could do to avoid rolling his eyes at the happy little moan Franklyn let out.

"Of course he was. We're not trading for a defective omega. What's wrong with him?"

"I'm afraid I must insist on doctor patient confidentiality."

"Then I'm afraid we're wasting our time here." Tobias turned to go but Matthew whispered something in his ear just as Franklyn let out a little distress whine. Hannibal caught the sideways glance they both shot at the omega.

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” Hannibal said once Matthew finished and Tobias half turned back to them. “His parents were concerned that self-consciousness about his weight was making it harder for him to find an Alpha. He is twenty-three but still unclaimed. We were still working through some alternative coping behaviours for him but Franklyn has made remarkable progress under my care.”

Looking down, Hannibal was relieved to see the omega beaming up happily at both of them. He seemed almost on the verge of saying something but Hannibal gave his hair another stroke with a microscopic pull at the end and Franklyn swallowed whatever it was down again.

“Can he do anything?” Matthew asked with equal parts curiosity and spite.

“He is a very accomplished cook and also enjoys music. His taste is excellent. I think if you give him a chance you will find that he is more than suitable for your requirements.”

“Say something,” Tobias ordered the omega.

Franklyn bent forward into “adore” showing off his broad back admirably and said, “Please give me the opportunity to serve, Alpha. I’ll do anything you ask of me.”

As he sat back up into “display”, even Hannibal found it difficult to tell if he was acting or not. Franklyn grinned from ear to ear.

Tobias considered for a moment and then signalled Matthew to open up the door again. Hannibal readied himself to spring just in case – there was no chance he was leaving the equipment behind at this point if he had to gut every survivor in the Institute with his bare hands. He was relieved, however, when Tobias waved for Chilton to start pushing the bulky ultrasound machine through the door and down the wheelchair ramp.

Hannibal signalled for Zeller to come over and help move everything into the RV. He wanted to be well away before Franklyn was required to speak again or do anything else. Alana and Hannibal both checked over everything to ensure it was in good condition.

Once it was all loaded up, Hannibal handed the leash to Tobias, reminded Franklyn to be a good pup and then strode quickly back to the RV. As he sat in the front seat, he could see the omega being led through the door. He was looking forward into the Institute instead of searchingly back at them which Hannibal took as a good sign. The odds could be as high as 50/50 of the omega not even trying his escape route.

Now that the equipment was finally secured and Franklyn was out of his hair for the moment, he could turn his full attention back to the difficult problem of what to do about Beverly Katz.

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Will was lying on the dingy floor of the cabin watching the stubs of the last of the candles burn out one by one. It was freezing everywhere except the embers under the big cast iron pot

on the fireplace but Will wasn't going anywhere near that thing. Just looking in its direction filled him with dread and loathing.

And there was something wrapped around his arms and legs. He couldn't quite see what it was. Maybe a heavy blanket. It didn't quite stop him from moving but all of his motions from the neck down felt like he was underwater.

Ahead of him he could see the back of a blue jacket, cut like part of a military uniform with big yellow patches on the shoulders, slung over a chair. With intense concentration he managed to free one hand enough to reach out and touch the bullet holes but pulled his finger back when he noticed the bloodstains around them.

He could hear a pounding sound, like frantic knocking on a heavy door but when he looked up at the windows all he could see was the thick lining of frost around the panes and the darkness beyond them. All of the doors were still.

There was a rustling under the chair and lifting up the back of the jacket, he saw a large grey teddy bear with a big red bow around its neck crawling towards him. He cried out and tried to pull himself back but his legs would barely move and looking around again it seemed like the bear was even more frightened of him.

It pulled itself to its feet using the seat of the chair and then reached out a boxy paw to Will. There was a "W" shaped smile stitched into its face and its black doll eyes were fixed on nothing, but somehow Will could sense it was terrified and wanted him to help it.

He managed to kick his way free of whatever was binding his legs. Looking down there was nothing but dusty floorboards. Standing up, the bear was nearly chest high to him. It took his hand and then waved for him to follow it.

His legs were all pins and needles and the bear kept walking in circles around the table and following the perimeter of the cabin. He had to keep reaching out to support himself on the side of the table or the wall and almost stumbled several times when he reached out to touch furniture that ended up being closer or further away than he thought it was or when the floor didn't seem to be exactly where it had been a moment before.

He was about to drop the bear's paw and refuse to do the next lap, when they broke away from their circuit and headed for the main door. The bear dropped his hand just as they reached it and then pointed up at the handle urgently. It was fine for the bear wanting to go outside. It was covered in fur. All Will had on were some weird felt pyjamas. And he was barefoot – the tops of his feet covered in orange and purple splotches from the bitter cold.

The pounding sound was back and some kind of faint panicked screaming. The bear started and pointed insistently at the door handle again. Will couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. He just wanted to get away from it.

There were three or four very heavy latches and bolts that Will had to undo. He even had to pull a chair over to reach the highest ones, but after a few moments he was able to step back and yank the door open. It took all his strength to move it about a foot.

A blast of freezing cold air in his face made him shut his eyes and when he reopened them he was looking into the big meat freezer in the basement and then a second later Katz was scooping him up in a big hug, lifting him up so that his arms wrapped around her shoulders and his legs around her waist. She was all but running down the corridor and she was freezing cold but Will was afraid to pull too far away from her in case she dropped him.

Confused and still half asleep, he looked around on the floor for the bear but it was gone.

They were heading for the ramp that led up into the garage. Resting his head on Katz's chest, he could almost hear her heart pounding.

"What's happening?" he asked breathlessly, although she was the one doing all of the hard work. "Where are we going?"

"You're going to visit Auntie Bella for a little while, sweetie. And I need to talk to Jack."

# Partition

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. This was a bit of a beast to write but hopefully came out OK.

Semi-graphic, melodramatic but (I hope) not overly prolonged birth scene.

Hannibal went in ahead with one of the cardboard boxes of supplies while Price and Zeller unloaded the ultrasound machine and Alana carried the heart monitor. As he came through the French doors from the garden into the kitchen he saw Jack standing at the entrance from the hall looking back at the stairs.

As Jack started to whip around, Hannibal caught a glimpse of the gun in his hands. He dropped the box and dove behind the island just as Jack brought the gun up and started firing. One bullet smashed the window in the door and several others sent splinters of floorboard flying.

Hannibal reached up into the drawers over his head and pulled out two chefs' knives. The firing had stopped but he couldn't hear Jack advancing.

"What the hell are you doing?" Alana asked from the door.

Hannibal used the distraction to stand up, hurl a knife at Jack and vault over the counter to face him directly. The knife skewered Jack's hand, forcing him to drop the gun and pause to remove it.

They started to grapple, Jack swinging the knife, while Hannibal dodged around it. Jack caught him slightly off balance, drove a shoulder into his stomach and shoved him back into a glass cabinet.

He knew that Jack was strong and had forty or fifty pounds and a few inches of height on him but he hadn't expected him to be so fast as well. Hannibal trained religiously to keep his advantage, sometimes hours a day before he'd brought the omegas home. But he rarely faced well-trained opponents and when he did he usually took care to get the drop on them so it was over before it really began. He preferred trapping to overpowering by brute force.

He wasn't panicking, but the fight suddenly had his full attention. More people were coming to the garden door and to the hall entrance but he couldn't spare a second to see who was there.

Jack threw him backwards over the island counter. His hand found one of the pan handles and he swung it as hard as he could at the other Alpha's head getting a satisfying strike to the jaw.

Jack tossed him head first into the corner. People were crying for them to stop – Alana, maybe Bella and one of the omegas. Nobody was moving closer to separate them though. He couldn't see who was there, what direction they were in or differentiate any of the voices.

Jack was swinging again. Hannibal captured one hand but the other grabbed his throat. He got it free and tried to throw the other Alpha but he was massive and managed to pull Hannibal back instead.

Hannibal trapped the hand with the knife again, punched Jack in the face and then slammed the freezer door into his head as he tried to stand up again.

Behind him or maybe inside his own head he could hear a feral growling sound. He might not be getting out of this alive against an entire pack of them, but he was taking a few of them out with him starting with Jack.

He went back for another knife and saw that Beverly and Randall were wrestling on the floor near the door to the hallway. At the other door, Alana, Price and Zeller were staring at them open-mouthed and in shock.

When he turned, Jack was punching at him again. He let Jack's momentum push him over the counter, plunged the knife with both hands at his neck but Jack blocked it with a book. There was screaming coming from some of the others but there was no time to locate who or about what.

Jack shoved him off during the second of distraction, got him in a choke hold and threw him over his shoulder, slamming him into the floor which was covered in shattered glass. Hannibal felt the wind knocked out of him and then Jack had a tie around his neck and was lifting him up and strangling him at the same time.

Randall was screaming "stop it" over and over again. The others were shouting their names. There was a powerful washing sound in Hannibal's ears like waves crashing on the beach which made it hard to distinguish anything else.

He didn't have much strength left so he decided to go limp and hope Jack would release him. He could feel the other Alpha panting from the exertion through his back.

Hannibal sank to his knees. Jack was literally curled over him breathing down his neck. Alana had come into the room with a pistol raised but her hands were shaking so badly he could barely tell who she was intending to point it at. Behind her he could see Katz lying on the floor. Randall was on all fours next to her, blood all over his face which was twisted up in agony.

Suddenly nothing else mattered except finding out what was wrong with his mate. His hand found a shard of glass and he shoved it behind him into Jack's neck, not really caring where it went as long as Jack's grip on him loosened. He started to stand, he heard a shot, then a searing pain in his shoulder. He crawled forward a few feet on one arm and then the room swam and went black.

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It was another dream about maple syrup glazed bacon. He'd been craving it insatiably for weeks. And while his Alpha had found an almost gallon sized jug of real maple syrup at the cruise ship terminal and let him have as much as he wanted on his crepes and waffles and slices of ham, actual bacon was elusive. The closest they had come was scrounged canned bacon and Hannibal had forbidden it on account of the nitrates.

His Alpha had promised that when he went back out to the Omega Institute again he was going to check if any of the surrounding farms still had pigs or if any had escaped into the forest. Even then it might take weeks to cure the bacon. Randall didn't really know how they did it. But he smiled in his sleep thinking about Hannibal in his suit chasing wild piglets through the brush.

And then someone was shaking his shoulder and telling him to wake up and he tried to summon the energy to roll over and see who it was. That was a major production. The cub was awake too and somersaulting in the opposite direction with a defiant kick nailing him right in the bladder for good measure.

It was Katz trying to drag him out of bed by the upper arm now. And maybe his ten-minute power nap had turned into an all-afternoon power lay-about but there was no need to get pushy. He couldn't help it that the bed smelled amazing and that Hannibal's sheets were like lying on...

"Come on, Randall..." she was whisper-ordering him.

"Oh my god, what?" the omega growled, finally swinging his legs around the side of the bed and letting Katz pull him to his feet.

"Just be quiet and come with me," she hissed starting to drag him towards the door.

His brain started to register that possibly they were under attack and the beta was probably trying to help him and maybe he should stop being a pain in the ass.

"Where are we going? What's going on?" He kept his voice low but he was starting to panic a little now. Maybe things had gone wrong at the Omega Institute? Or the zombies had breached the line somewhere? Where was Will?

"We're going over to Jack's for a little while. Will's already there. Bella's going to watch you guys for a bit."

He started stumbling after her toward the stairs out of force of habit before stopping. "Where's Hannibal? We're not supposed to go out."

"It's fine," Katz told him, pulling him along by the upper arm now. "Hannibal said it's fine. He'll see you over there later."

It didn't sound right, but Randall was still half asleep and couldn't think of another argument.

Coming downstairs, he could see Jack standing in the doorway of the kitchen looking back at them and waving for them to hurry. The zombies must have breached the line somewhere.

There was no other reason why he would have his gun drawn in the house.

Just as they reached the bottom of the stairs, Jack snapped around and started firing at something in the kitchen. He could hear from Alana's voice she was in there too. Katz was trying to drag him towards the front door but that didn't make any sense.

He caught a glimpse through the doorway as Jack stepped aside and saw Hannibal jumping over the kitchen counter. There must have been something in the kitchen that they were both fighting. He tried to run over to get a better look but Katz was trying to drag him in the opposite direction, first by the arm and then by grabbing him around the chest and trying to haul him bodily.

Glass was shattering and now he could see Jack knocking his Alpha back over the counter and Hannibal swinging a pan at Jack's head. He twisted away out of Katz's grip and tried to run to the doorway to get a better view.

It didn't make any sense. It really looked like they were trying to kill each other. And while they were never exactly bestest buddies, Randall was sure that all the past friction had just been Alpha posturing. His Alpha was smarter and stronger but technically the other Alpha was his boss. That was bound to cause some tension.

This wasn't posturing. It was a rage-driven and purposeful – the obvious intent that only one of them was still going to be breathing at the end of it.

Jack's back was to him and Randall's instinct was to try to capture his arms from behind, even for a few seconds so that he could really think about what he was doing and notice that everyone else was there and then stop. But before he could get two steps into the kitchen, Katz tackled him to the floor with all her strength.

He landed straight on his stomach, too surprised to brace himself. There was an agonizing cramp and then a sensation like being tasered in the spine. And then something behind his eyes switching on or maybe switching off.

He felt like he was floating except he was flipping over and Katz was under him now and there was another massive cramp and then his teeth were at her throat and then in her throat and he could taste metal and her blood was hot on both of his cheeks and all over his mouth. He'd never thought about it being hot before.

He spat something rubbery out but the taste remained but he could hardly feel it because he was just cramping, cramping, cramping now and something that felt like power drills being driven into his hips and down into the tops of his thighs through the middle of the bones.

Someone was screaming and Hannibal was growling he was pretty sure but he couldn't bear to open his eyes and look even though he was desperate to see if he was still alive.

There was a pinching in his upper arm. Someone was standing next to him giving him a shot in the arm but he still couldn't open his eyes. It wasn't Hannibal. It didn't smell like him. But he was still in the room somewhere.

He was snarling again and twisting around to find their calf and bite it but it was like tossing around on a boat and he lost his balance and curled over on his side on the floor slipping away.

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He woke up in the bathtub in the basement room, another contraction wringing him out before he could even register embarrassment about being naked. Bella was leaning over the side wiping his forehead with a cool cloth and humming a little song.

“What’s happening?” he groaned through the muzzle someone had strapped to his face. It made his breath condense around his cheeks which were already flushed. He tried to pull himself up but the slightest effort to move made him dizzy and sent waves of pain up and down his sides.

“Hang in there, honey,” Bella told him gently shoving his shoulder back. “Your water broke while you were sleeping and we had to get you cleaned up.”

“Where’s everybody? Why are we down here?”

“Dr. Bloom is taking care of the Alphas down in the medical bay so she asked me to sit here with you until the cub is closer to coming.”

“Is it coming now? Is that why it hurts? It’s too early.”

“Shhh... everything is going to be fine.”

She was avoiding the question, which didn’t make him feel any better. But he had bigger things to worry about.

“Where’s Alpha? And Will?” The whole house felt deathly still except for his panting efforts to get his breath back under control.

“Dr. Bloom’s taking care of Hannibal. I’m sure he’ll be fine. They’re all in good hands. And Will’s waiting at our house. He wasn’t sure if you’d want him to see you like this.” Randall thought for a second he saw tears in Bella’s eyes but just as quickly she was smiling and stroking his hair back again.

“Can I see him? Wait, can I have a blanket first? Can I take the muzzle off? I can’t breathe.” He fumbled helplessly at the straps at the back of his head but couldn’t seem to find where they started.

“Hang on a second there sweetie – one thing at a time.”

Bella helped him up until he was sitting on a towel draped over the toilet and then handed him another towel to dry off. She went to the other room to get him a blanket and as soon as she was gone, he was bent over with another contraction so severe he almost fell to the ground.

She raced back when she saw him struggling and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders.

Bella half-walked, half-carried him over to the bed. He asked to take the muzzle off again and she changed the subject. When he moved to take it off she distracted him again.

He started trying to fumble with the straps again and Bella pulled his arms back down to his sides telling him he needed to leave it on for now and if he kept trying to take it off she would have to restrain his arms as well.

“Why?” he whined, wincing at how babyish the words came out. He was almost too weak to sit up and suspected they were barely getting started. It was ridiculous that Bella thought he needed to be tied down or muzzled.

“Do you really not remember what happened?” she asked, sitting back and giving him a puzzled look.

“Alpha and Agent Crawford got in a fight.”

“Not with them, with Agent Katz.”

And then he did remember. Only not really – just fuzzy impressions through the pounding in his temples and the aches all over his body. He’d knocked her over. She’d made this gurgling sound. Something tasted funny. And then he was flooded with shame as powerful as a contraction.

“Is she OK?”

“I don’t know, honey. Dr Bloom is working on her too.”

“I didn’t mean to do anything. I don’t know what happened.” He tried to sit up but it was impossible. It was like he was being sucked down into the bed by the gigantic ache that was his midsection. So he settled for bursting into tears instead. He wished he’d just died in the van accident all those months back and none of this had ever happened and then everyone else would be alright.

“I know you didn’t sweetheart. But let’s just focus on getting this little one where he wants to be.” She rested a hand on his belly and the cub kicked at it triggering another massive contraction that had him genuinely screaming for the first time. It was a bit of a blessing that he couldn’t think about anything else but on the other hand he began to panic about being ripped apart and none of his family was even there.

Then Abigail came through the door to investigate the sound. He could see her eyes were red-rimmed and had big dark circles under them. She lingered at the door like she was uncertain whether to approach or not. It was stupid. It’s not like she hadn’t seen him naked before.

“Is he OK?” he tried to call to her, annoyed that he had to find the strength to raise his hoarse voice to reach her.

“Dr Bloom says he’s stable for now,” she called back. “He was asking about you too but he’s asleep now. She’s operating on Agent Crawford and then she’s going to do another operation on him to get the bullet out.”

“Did she say anything about him?” Bella asked trying to keep the worry out of her voice but Randall could see the shine of tears again.

Abigail shrugged and looked teary as well and Bella walked over to hug her as if Abigail was the one in need of comforting. Although he supposed she was as well. It was hard to remember that she was bonded to his Alpha too.

Bella brought her over to sit on the side of the bed and they took turns fetching him ice chips and juice boxes and wiping all the sweat that kept streaming down his face. It was unbearably hot with the blanket on and unbearable cold and embarrassing with it off. Also impossible to sit down and stand up and lie down on either his back or his side or to sit on all fours. After five or six hours he was crawling out of his skin and the need to feel his Alpha sitting around him was like a physical ache.

When the contractions were building into a constant blur of pain he lay on his side whimpering and crying over and over for his Alpha who never came. It’s like he suddenly had two brains. His little exhausted brain knew his Alpha would be there if he could and his big raging weepy brain alternated between “He’s not here because he’s dead” and “He’s not here because he doesn’t really care about me. If he really cared, he wouldn’t have been fighting.”

And then finally he was in so much constant pain that he couldn’t think about anything except making it all be over. Abigail went to fetch Dr Bloom but came back empty handed saying she couldn’t leave the surgery she was in the middle of. And apparently Dr Du Maurier was assisting and also couldn’t come.

So Abigail had to sit behind him, hugging him, propping him up and trying to steady his breathing while Bella peered between his legs and kept up a constant stream of nonsensical reassurances.

It wasn’t going to be OK. Nothing was alright. Even if, by some miracle, all three of them survived in one piece, Alpha was never going to get what he wanted – this once in a lifetime moment for all of them together. Randall was the worst omega ever – not even really an omega - and it was all so screwed...

And then he started sobbing hysterically while Abigail tried to remind him how to breathe and Bella told him to bear down sounding a little uncertain about what she was asking for.

He felt like he was going to throw up and asked them to take the muzzle off again and when they refused he snarled at them but managed to pass it off as another contraction. And, as if he didn’t feel guilty enough, he could see that his grip on Abigail’s hands were turning them bright white and she was gritting her teeth.

And it just went on and on and on until he thought his teeth would shatter from grinding and his eyes would burst from being squeezed shut and all his joints would break. He kept losing his voice from screaming and then finding it again when the pain ramped up to the next level.

A thousand miles away Bella was saying something about the head and it took a while to remember that that’s why he was even here and all of this was happening. He did try to pay

more attention and to push when she told him too and then it really did feel like he was being ripped apart and he couldn't tell if he was cramping around something or nothing.

Bella was laughing, Abigail was leaning forward behind him to see something and then he heard something else screaming for a change – this totally new thing that hadn't really been there before except that of course it had been with him already for ages.

He unscrewed his eyes to look, sudden relief washing through him, as Bella set the cub on his chest.

"It's a boy," she told him as if it wasn't obvious. The cub didn't stop screaming even when he wrapped his arms around it though. Wasn't that supposed to soothe him?

"Hi, cub," he tried. Alpha said that the cub could hear his voice even in his belly and would be able to recognise it but if he did, it didn't seem to be working.

Bella took yet another clean towel and started wiping away the streaks of blood and waxy white gunk.

"Yes, sweetheart, it is a big mess," she cooed at the cub.

"He's definitely Hannibal's," Abigail said and they all laughed.

And he did look a little like his sire. He had his lips and very fine downy blonde hair. And maybe Randall's bigger nose. He wouldn't open his eyes though and all of his other features just looked like wizened old man cub features. Chubby purple cheeks. Wrinkles on his little fingers and arms and legs and forehead. Actual little fingernails already totally formed.

Bella took him away for a few minutes to weigh him and cut the cord and finish cleaning him up. Randall was still cramping a little but he could feel the intensity starting to die away and some of his muscles start to unclench a little. He was so exhausted it was like he'd never even suspected the meaning of the word before.

"He's already nine pounds even a few weeks premature," Bella told them as she brought the cub back over wrapped in a blanket and set him down in Randall's arms. "You're lucky – he might have been an eleven or twelve pounder otherwise."

Randall leaned forward to try to kiss his forehead and then remembered that the muzzle was in the way.

"Can't we take it off now?" he begged the other omega. "I promise I'm not going to hurt anyone."

Bella seemed to be debating with herself for a moment and then finally leaned forward to remove it.

As soon as it was gone, Randall was able to scent the cub, his cub, properly. He even smelled a little like his sire already. And as soon as Randall nuzzled his nose into the cub's pudgy little neck, he stopped crying and opened bright copper coloured eyes onto the world.

# Disrelation

Will could hear his footsteps echoing on the marble floors as he walked through the dimly lit gallery. The only light was directed at a painting at the end of the corridor, something with nymphs and apple trees. One of them was strewing flower petals on the ground and for a second Will thought he could smell something like dried flowers.

In front of the painting he could just make out the outline of a kid about his age sitting on a black leather bench and drawing something. Will couldn't stop looking at his long back stretched under his blazer.

He sat down next to him and the other kid gave Will a sly smile for a second before turning back to his sketch pad. He had long dirty blonde hair that fell over his eyes and made them hard to see.

He was copying the blue, corpse-like figure on the right who was snatching one of the nymphs away. The drawing was flawless but Will was distracted by the veins in the other boy's hands and the way his knuckles flexed.

Feeling his face flush slightly, he looked back up at the painting to try to distract himself. But he found himself reaching out the way he sometimes couldn't help. He tried not to. He knew people didn't like it and neither did he really.

He likes their fat bellies, Will realised. The curls in their hair. The way the gauzy dresses bunch up around their hips like fingers.

One of his legs was jogging up and down without him realising it which was making the bench shake a little. The motion knocked one of the other boy's pencil strokes slightly out of place. He transferred the pencil to his other hand and turned slightly.

Will's breath caught, thinking he would be angry but the boy only smiled at him a little sadly and said, "Will."

His hand was on his knee then, some of the fingers pressing on his inner thigh and Will started awake almost banging his head on the bunk above him.

They were sleeping in the RV now. When they first moved to the Stammets farm, they'd tried sleeping in the cabin but then one night they'd been attacked by twenty zombies at once and after Zeller was almost killed so Jack decided it wasn't safe enough for him and Bella to sleep there anymore.

It was a pain though. Will didn't like the feeling of confinement in the little bunk, especially when the curtains were pulled around him. It felt airless - like being in a coffin.

He was soaked in sweat, his throat was raw with thirst and he had a boner.

And there was nothing he could do about it except try to think about something else. He could hear Jack snoring in the bedroom only a few feet away. If he tried touching himself, they would know about it. Jack always seemed to know and would give him that weird uncertain look like he didn't know whether to punish him or sit him down for another long awkward talk. The only time he could ever get away with it was when Jack was exhausted after a long day working in the garden and Will snuck out to the river to check his lures.

He crept into the kitchen and poured a glass of water. The jug was almost empty but he wasn't allowed out of the RV after dark so he couldn't go back to the pump to refill it. He was tempted to go anyway but he knew everyone was going to be on edge today and it wasn't the time to push it.

Jack hadn't been able to walk for almost a year because of the injury to his spine and he still couldn't run and needed a cane most of the time. But he could still swing the shit out of it if Will gave him enough reason to.

Will heard coughing in the bedroom and then saw Bella sneaking out under the curtain in her nightgown. She didn't want to wake her Alpha up if it was going to be a long fit. And just like that his boner was gone.

She was making a continuous chain of little huffing coughs almost under her breath to avoid them both hearing but when she saw Will was already awake she relaxed and let out some louder ones. He handed her what was left of the water in the glass and she took it gratefully.

When the coughing stilled she smiled and gave him a hug. "Thank you, sweetie. Did you sleep OK?"

Will just shrugged and looked at the floor. There was no point lying about it. He knew he had giant black bags under his eyes and no matter how much time he spent out in the sun helping Bella with the garden he still looked pale. He hadn't had a really solid night's sleep in more than five years. But there was nothing Bella could do about it, so there was no point getting into it.

And then she did her mind-reading thing while she messed up his hair even more. "I'm sorry, love. I wish there was something I could do to help."

Just stop being sick, he wanted to tell her but of course that was impossible so instead he took the glass back and started washing it.

"You know you don't have to go today if you don't want to. Everyone will understand."

"Yeah, I know," Will mumbled. "I want to though. I think."

He felt the familiar tumble of fear, remorse and curiosity in his gut. Jack and Bella wouldn't let him see Hannibal before they left but they would have let him see Randall if he'd asked. He'd sat at their house and tried reaching out to his brother and what he got back was an explosion of anger and agony and actual loathing. Will had never felt anything like it in his life and certainly not from the other omega. So he hadn't said goodbye because he didn't want to make it worse. And it was almost a relief when Jack said he couldn't see Hannibal

either. What was he supposed to say to either of them? Sorry I ruined your lives? Let's just pretend I didn't almost get you both killed?

But it was his little nephew's fifth birthday party today. And he'd never even seen him. He was dying to know what he looked like and his personality and how he got on with Randall. He knew his brother had worried all the time about it – that he didn't really know what to do with a cub and that he would mess everything up.

For the first few years, while Jack recovered, Price and Zeller lived with them but went back and forth trading a lot. Bedelia and Alana had decided to go vegetarian which meant they needed a supply of the mushrooms from the farm to avoid getting the virus and they were happy to trade for canned goods and spare livestock.

Bella went back with them a few times and reported to him on the cub's progress even when he pretended he wasn't dying to know. They'd named the cub Hannibal too but called him Hans or Hansel. Bella said he looked more like Hannibal but acted a bit like Will sometimes. Whatever that meant.

Will fell in easily next to Bella's side while she prepared some breakfast. It was a special occasion so she used up some of their precious dwindling coffee supply while Will made mushroom omelettes and hash browns.

Jack came into the kitchen sniffing after the coffee and smiling. He kissed Bella full on the lips and then ruffled Will's hair when he caught him blushing and looking away.

"How are my two favourite omegas this morning?" he asked settling at the dining table. Will almost expected him to shake out a newspaper and start reading it but of course that was stupid. It was strange how even after all this time the old world would still crash in on his thoughts sometimes.

"Much better today," Bella told him smiling while she set the coffee and tray of food in front him. They both knelt down on either side of the Alpha's knees.

"Did you get some sleep, Will?" And the concern in his voice was genuine which just made everything else more confusing.

"Yes," he replied between bites. "Not too bad."

"You know you don't have to go today. Just say the word and we'll cancel."

"I know. I want to see everyone though." Will surprised himself with how convinced he sounded.

"OK, then," Jack decided for them. "A long overdue reunion it is."

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They'd added a gate with a lot of spikes around it and there was a bit more rubbish blowing around on the outside streets, but otherwise the houses looked just the same as when they'd

left. They were able to drive directly into the central alley and up to the back gate of the garden while Price shut the gates behind them.

As Will stepped out of the RV, Bedelia wrapped him in a powerful hug saying how good it was to see him again and how grown up he looked now. She kept one arm around his shoulders as she led him into the garden.

He knew she'd had a cub with Zeller a few years back and that's why he and Price had decided, after much agonising, to move back to the compound. She looked exactly the same though - still wearing perfume and silk blouses and had her hair immaculately styled. At least some things never changed.

There were two tables set up in the back garden at different heights as well as streamers and flowers garlanding all the trees, the garden walls and the fountain. The kids table had seven chairs set around it and a large pack of little cubs jostling and talking over each other while they opened up the party favours.

It was easy to see which one was Hans. He was the tallest by five or six inches and looked exactly like his sire except he had Randall's bigger nose. He was dressed in a little suit like it was the most natural thing in the world for a five year old. Standing at the head of the kids table, what he did seem bothered by was the complete anarchy all around him and the threat that it posed to what looked like a very expensive tea set. He was distracting himself, though, by helping his little beta sister open her present.

Will was just about to introduce himself to his nephew when Hannibal came out of the kitchen carrying a giant tray of petits fours. Despite himself, Will felt his breath catch in his throat and he immediately dropped his eyes and felt his cheeks flush. He looked exactly the same as he remembered – like his whole face had been carved in granite.

"Hello Will," the Alpha said and his voice was as warm as Will had ever heard it. He's not even remotely angry Will realised risking a millisecond of eye contact that found nothing but affection, amusement and a little surprise. What did he have to be surprised about? He invited us and of course he knew we wouldn't be able to stay away.

"Hello Dr Lecter", he replied as soon as he could steady his voice.

# Diversion

“Hannibal,” Bella said with polite brightness sinking onto her knees next to him. Will started for a second and then knelt down as well. He was a little irritated with himself for forgetting but it’s not like they’d had millions of chances at the farm to practice manners.

“It’s so good to see you both again,” Hannibal said lifting Bella back up with a kiss to her hand and ruffling Will’s hair.

Jack came up behind them just at that moment and Hannibal pulled his hand away, his eyes flicking for a second to the cane. Will thought he saw the ghost of a smirk as he was getting back to his feet but then it was gone.

“Dr Lecter,” Jack said brusquely his eyes wandering across the party. Peter had brought out a few cages of animals and the cubs were massing around him to pet the bunnies and newly hatched chicks. Will almost didn’t recognise him he looked so normal and happy.

“I’m so glad you could make it Jack. It’s been far too long.”

There was an awkward pause and then Will couldn’t contain himself any longer. “Where’s Randall?”

“He’s in the garage,” Hannibal replied and Will could see a little shadow cross his face. He’s annoyed with Randall about something, he thought, but not quite enough to just order him to do what he wants.

“Can I go see him?” Will asked Hannibal without thinking.

“Yes, of course,” Hannibal and Jack said at the same time.

“You don’t need to ask,” Hannibal told him placing a friendly hand on his shoulder.

Will gave a little gulp and a half turn and then back before deciding to just walk off. He couldn’t think of anything else to say and he was dying to see his brother again. He could still feel the weight of the hand on his shoulder though halfway across the yard. He didn’t know why everything had to be so weird and embarrassing. When he was a cub he’d slept in Hannibal’s bed all the time in just his underwear and never thought twice about it and now just knowing that Hannibal was looking at him across the garden was enough to make him want to sink into the ground.

Randall didn’t notice the door opening so Will had a few seconds to watch him first. He’d grown maybe another inch but he looked smaller to Will who, of course, had grown more than a foot. His hair had gotten a lot darker, closer to the same shade as Will’s, and he had a five o’clock shadow which stood out against his pale skin. One of the rare unlucky omegas who had to shave.

He was working on a huge truck that Will had never seen before. It was lifted up on monster truck wheels with grilles protecting them and a number of spikes sticking out from the front. It was high enough up that he had to stand on a ladder to work on the engine. He was coming down to switch to a different size socket wrench when he noticed Will at the door. Instead of saying anything though he just continued to the workbench and tossed the wrench down on it.

Still pissed then, Will thought. He walked forward a little more into the light but couldn't think of anything to say.

"You look like shit," Randall told him finally, grabbing another wrench and heading back to the engine. "Aren't they feeding you out there?"

Will huffed out a laugh. He latched on to the tiny kernel of concern at the heart of his brother's hostility. Pissed, but he hasn't written me off.

"Yes, they feed me. Probably not what you get here though."

Randall glared at him before burying his head under the hood again. He hadn't meant it that way and now he was just making this worse.

"I just meant... I'm okay." Will traced his finger along the design on the casing of a chainsaw that was leaning against one side of the truck. "Are you?"

"Yeah, great," Randall said without looking up.

I'm sorry, Will thought over and over but the words choked up at the top of his throat so he said, "What is all this?" instead.

After a few more seconds, Randall came down the ladder again, wiping more grease on his grey henley and stood next to him.

"It's to make it easier to clear the streets of infected," he said. "So you don't have to be so exposed when you do it. You drive down the street, the zombies get caught on the spikes but then this bar moves up and down along the bottom to push them off so you don't have to keep stopping when the spikes are full. And then I was going to add something like wings with the chainsaws on them that can pivot out from under the chassis and take them down from the sides as well."

"Holy shit," Will said genuinely impressed. "Did you actually build all this?"

Randall just shrugged but Will could tell he was pleased. "The tires are still the weak point. I put the grilles on so they'd be harder to puncture but now they're more likely to catch on things and they make it harder to drive over stuff. And I guess they can still puncture if you drive over something sharp enough."

"And Hannibal's actually going to let you drive it?"

Randall shrugged again. "He doesn't care what I'm working on out here."

Before Will could ask any more though, he was interrupted by a little sobbing pastel blue clad streak which shot past him and then glommed onto Randall's leg crying, "Daddy, daddy!"

"Hey, bug. Watch out for your clothes." Randall was holding his grease covered hands clear but there were still stains all over his shirt and the dirty rags hanging through his belt loops.

"When are you coming to my party?" Hans stepped back a little so Will got a better view of his huge welling puppy dog eyes. It was everything he could do to stop himself from laughing at the little cub's dramatics.

"In a second," Randall told him reaching for another rag to wipe his hands. "Why don't you say hello to your uncle? This is my brother Will."

"Hello," the cub told him perfunctorily before returning to the business at hand faster than Will could respond. "Christopher's ruining everything!"

"Well, he's only two..." Randall told him rolling his eyes over the cub's head at Will.

"But he keeps trying to sing the birthday song now and even his mommy told him he had to wait for the big cake. And I told him over and over he has to use the teaspoon if he wants to stir in his glass and now he's using the wrong spoon on purpose."

As much as Will wanted to laugh he could see that the cub was also starting to work himself into a genuine state of distress, stomping his foot with his fists balled and tears streaking down his face.

"Okay, get a grip kiddo," Randall told him putting the last of his tools away. This was not the right response. The cub's sobs started welling over and snot was pouring down his face.

"Okay, okay," Randall said grabbing his cleanest rag and wiping the cub's nose with it. "Go tell Papa and he'll sort everything out."

"But aren't you coming to my party?"

"Yes, I'm coming now."

"Papa said you have to come now."

"I know. I just need to take a shower and change first."

"Why don't you come with me and tell me all about what you guys have planned?" Will jumped in holding out his hand for the cub.

Hans hesitated for a second, looking to Randall, who gestured for him to go with his uncle. Then he wrapped all of his fingers around two of Will's and led him back out into the garden.

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“The roads weren’t too bad,” Jack was saying as he cleared his throat. “Better than they used to be.”

“You’ve gotten lucky with the weather,” Bella added.

Hannibal almost but didn’t quite refrain from smirking at their awkward small talk. He was watching Will walk into the garage. Almost full-grown now, the pup was smaller than Hannibal had expected and much too thin. Big bags under his eyes as well. Dressed one step up from a tramp in what were likely the best clothes he owned. Like serving Domaine de le Romanée-Conti chilled in a plastic cup.

When he’d woken up from his surgery and found that the Crawfords had absconded with his omega, his first impulse had been to hunt them down. Alana had to dial the morphine up to the maximum repeatedly and strap him to the surgical bed to keep him from sneaking out. The bullet shattered his collarbone, sending fragments all over his chest and even now he had limited range of motion in his left shoulder.

Even if he had caught up with them, leaving his mate and newborn cub unguarded, and managed to kill four of them one-handed and drag Will back by the hair like his instincts were screaming at him to do, it would have demolished the very tentative pact he’d managed to preserve with Bedelia, Alana and Abigail. They would pretend his Ripper days were all in the past and stay to help care for the cub and he would pretend his Ripper days were all in the past and not rub in their faces how unsatisfying he found killing zombies as a substitute for his pre-plague performance art.

Not to mention Will would never speak to him again. And he had promised the pup a choice. And sometimes it was helpful to see the obverse of something to understand what you were looking at in the first place. Five years of living in squalor in a shack should certainly put the relative comforts of Hannibal’s home in stark relief.

In any case, they couldn’t get far. If they weren’t going to eat what he had to offer, the only alternative was the mushrooms and they only knew about one source of them. He’d guessed they were at the farm long before Price and Zeller first showed up waving a truce flag and wanting to talk trade.

After he’d healed, he’d gone out several times to ensure it was safe. He didn’t like that they let the omega wander unattended around the farm. If he’d wanted to there were a handful of times when he could have grabbed him himself. But again, Will needed to come to him under the impression that it was his own volition or the rest of it would never work out.

Knowing that didn’t make it any easier to see him in such poor shape now though.

“Are you keeping well?” Hannibal asked, suddenly aware that the Crawfords were desperately scanning the party for something to do other than continue talking with him.

Bella broke into a coughing fit as if on cue. Hannibal offered her his handkerchief and as he knelt to her level he caught a faint whiff of something like rosehips beginning to rot. It was much stronger than his schoolmaster’s stomach cancer. It must be more advanced, he concluded. Probably the lungs.

He waved over Alana who was crouched next to their little son Tomas listening patiently as he recounted his two-year old woes. Something about the miniature goat he was trying to pet snatching his model airplane and running off with it. When she stood up he felt a little spark of pride at her swelling belly. She was only about five months gone but it was her third cub so she was showing earlier.

It hadn't been easy to talk her around, but he'd been able to leverage the copious guilt she'd felt at almost killing him when he was only trying to defend himself and his pup. And they'd managed to find a mutually satisfying balance where she got her independence, her own house and a progression of cubs to spoil and he got her stay in the pack. She was excellent with all the cubs and her medical training was frequently handy.

"It's just a cough," Bella said as she recovered and noticed Alana coming their way. "Probably just allergies. We don't have so many flowers out on the farm."

"As long as you're here, though, why don't you let Dr Bloom check it out?" Hannibal suggested. "And if it's just allergies, you're welcome to whatever we have for them."

Bella looked to Jack and he gave her a kiss on the forehead to signal his permission.

Once they had disappeared inside, Hannibal continued. "You know you're welcome to move back here any time you want. If Bella is unwell, perhaps it would be better for her to be closer to medical help."

"We're fine," Jack responded a little too quickly. And then after a longer pause, "Thank you for the offer, but there is Will's safety to consider."

"He can't possibly be safer with the two of you out in the middle of nowhere with no real defences."

"That's a matter of opinion, Doctor."

"You know I would never do anything to harm Will."

"Tell that to Beverly Katz. And the seventy-five case files sitting on my desk." Jack dropped his voice as several of the cubs ran screeching past them to get to the ice cream Bedelia was carrying out.

"It was never my intention to harm Dr Katz. I simply locked her somewhere safe until there was time to have a rational discussion about the things she uncovered. And all the rest of it was a different lifetime ago. It might as well have been a different person. Will will always be part of my family. All of you are, really. And being split apart like this isn't doing any of us any good."

"So you're honestly taking no responsibility at all for what happened to Bev? For any of it?"

Hannibal paused for a moment to signal to one of Abigail's cubs that he was allowed one scoop, not two. The cub made a face but Bedelia was there to deal with it.

“What happened to Bev was a tragic accident. She was my friend and colleague as well as everyone else’s. And I am still mourning her loss after all these years. But she attacked a bred omega who was nesting and in distress. Randall didn’t mean to harm her either but the threat to his cub overwhelmed him. I think if we could take back the events of that day, we all would. But we can’t change the past. We can only face the reality of what we have in front of us and try to do the best we can for the people that depend on us.”

The other Alpha was speechless for a change and in any case here was Hannibal’s oldest cub stalking towards him still in tears because his efforts to govern his littler siblings were going unheeded. He was dragging Will along with him, the omega clearly already under his nephew’s spell. Hannibal took a deep breath and a moment to appreciate the sight of the curly haired pup hand in hand with his little cub.

“And think where we would be if everything had turned out differently. You may not like what I did or even who I was but you and your mate would not be alive otherwise.” Hannibal paused for a moment to let that sink in. Jack was grinding his teeth but not arguing. “In any case, please remember that you are all always welcome here.”

And, satisfied that he had made the point he intended, Hannibal went to put the rest of his family in order.

# Reflection

Will tried not to let his breath catch in a way that would alarm his little nephew as he came to the top of the stairs and saw the walls. Instead of the crisp white geometrical segments that he remembered, a giant forest mural had been painted across every surface in the hallway. Looking up he could see glimpses of a cloudy sky through the canopy in the ceiling which faded into the moonlit sky at the far end of the hall over the door to Hannibal's room.

The cub raced ahead of him, disappearing into Will's old room, while Will stopped to inspect a tiny centipede crawling over a log. On a higher branch of the scraggly pine tree he could see a stoat stalking up to a clutch of eggs in an unguarded nest. Lemon yellow songbirds with black wings were perched in a row over the door to the music room, their throats thrown back and exposed in what could have been singing or calling for help.

"Who did all this?" he asked Hans, although the answer was obvious. Who else would have the patience to spend months decorating a forest scene for their kids and not be able to resist injecting his sinister sense of humour into every other inch of it?

"Papa," his nephew called back proudly. "When I was little, I said I wanted a tree house so he painted it."

Will pulled himself away from the picture of a little pond next to the bathroom door, took a deep breath and walked into his old room. It was similarly unrecognisable. The shutters that had always been locked shut were now open and the early summer sun shone through brightening everything.

It was still the same bed, but it was covered in a vibrant patchwork quilt and dozens of stuffed animals. There was more furniture making the room look smaller – a toy chest, a cabinet full of art supplies, a little table and chairs and a long low bookshelf.

Hans stood beside the latter pulling out each book in order, frowning at it and putting it carefully back into place. The mural from the hallway continued into the bedroom so Will traced his fingers along the branches while the boy searched for the story he wanted.

"It's not here," he concluded at last, sliding the last book back with the exact same expression Hannibal used to get when one of them put something back into the wrong section of the fridge.

"Does it have to be that particular story?" Will asked conscious that they were probably holding up the party downstairs. Knowing the Alpha, there would be a schedule for blowing out the candles and the gift opening and each course of the meal. "This one looks good," he offered pulling out the first one he could see. It had some kind of farm machinery on the cover.

"Yes," Hans proclaimed before turning and running down the hall. Will put the book back and then chased after him cringing as he saw the boy disappear into Hannibal's room calling for his daddy.

He was being ridiculous, he told himself as he stood outside the door biting his cuticles and feeling little currents of electricity running up and down the back of his neck. He used to live here. It was his brother's room too. He wasn't planning anything except retrieving his nephew and finding the right picture book for him. Why did it feel so wrong to just push through into the bedroom? What did he expect to find? Chains and a giant sex swing? What the hell was wrong with him?

He took a deep breath and dragged his suddenly stiff legs forward until he was standing in the corner of the bedroom. Here was the one part of the upstairs that was exactly the way he remembered it. The same ottoman, the same rug, the same bed linens and cushions, probably the same logs in the fireplace. Will let out the breath he forgot he was holding.

Meanwhile Randall came out of the bathroom with only a towel wrapped around his waist. The little cub was trailing after him. His little cub, Will reminded himself. Why was it so hard to remember that any of this was his brother's too? He wondered where Randall got to store his clothes and the rest of his things. Certainly nowhere visible.

Will's eyes flashed across the omega's torso. He didn't even realise he was looking for scars or bruises until he was relieved not to find them.

"Does it have to be that one?" Randall was arguing with his cub. "You have a whole library full of them."

"Yes," Hans insisted. "The mouse one. Papa was reading it last night and I fell asleep before the ending."

"Well it's not here," Randall told him gesturing towards the nightstands which were as orderly as ever and then moving towards the closet to find his clothes.

"Where were you reading it, short stuff?" Will asked kneeling down to intercept the cub who was trying to continue his pestering into the closet.

Hans fiddled with the sleeve of his blazer while he thought and then lit up when he remembered. "In the big library, come on," he gasped out grabbing Will's hand again and dragging him along.

Will was breathless by the time they entered the study. Keeping up with so many little cubs must be exhausting.

The study was also exactly as he remembered it with a few more concessions to parenthood. There were some comfy blankets and more pillows on the long black chaise lounge. Hans jumped over and then triumphantly held up a copy of The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse.

Will smiled at him as the cub rifled through the book trying to find the last part he could remember.

What else was different? It was so strange to be surrounded all of a sudden by so many things again. Hannibal's study always made him feel like if he lived for a hundred million years he

would never be able to catch up. He had a single shelf of books in the RV, most of which he could recite by heart. A handful had been left behind in the Stammets house, a few had been in the RV when they left, a few Price and Zeller picked up from scavenging. Will had never worked up the courage to ask them to bring something new back from the big house.

But here were thousands of books he'd never cracked once. He was sure Hannibal would lend some to him if he asked. But what would he expect in return? Will coming back to return them? Sitting down like they used to and discussing what he liked about them?

What else was different? There was a long row of origami animals along the edge of Hannibal's desk. A few with jammy fingerprints on them had been dropped in the waste paper basket.

Hannibal still had his easel but there was a child-sized one set up next to it. Will smiled at Hans' crayon rendition of a birthday cake and all the other treats he wanted for his party.

Straightening back up again, the pencil drawing on Hannibal's easel caught his attention. It was the painting from the gallery. The blue corpse-like angel with puffed cheeks materialising out of the darkness of the forest to drag away one of the nymphs. She was biting on some kind of dark herb or flower.

Suddenly the room was swimming and Will could feel that he was panting for breath. He felt like his heart was going to explode out of his chest. Sweat was dripping into his ears. It was like an electrified fist had grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. He didn't want to frighten the cub but he didn't think he could make it to a chair without falling over. He sank into a cross legged sit and then a moment later gently lay down on his side.

He could barely hear anything over the rush of static in his ears but he sensed Hans running out of the room to get someone. Shit, shit, shit, his mind raced. I can't even hold it together for a two hour party. Why do I have to ruin everything?

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Will waded out into the quiet of the stream. It had been an endless drive home yesterday after Jack decided they were leaving. He'd expected Hannibal to argue for them to stay to the end but the Alpha seemed happy to be rid of them. And of course he was. He'd obviously spent weeks trying to arrange the perfect party for his perfect son. And he'd had his chance to smugly show them what a mistake they had made leaving so there was no other reason to keep them around. Certainly not if they were going to cause a scene.

Bella was tense which made Jack overcompensate. He had Will dig out her favourite CD, Holst's The Planets, and then hummed and tapped along on the steering wheel casting occasional anxious glances at her.

Somewhere around Jupiter she said she had a headache and went back to lie in bed with the curtains drawn. Will could feel despair pouring off of her but couldn't understand it. He didn't think Bella missed their old homes in the city so much. He wanted to go back and talk to her but Jack saw him hovering around the curtain and snapped for him to come sit up front.

Will crawled up into the passenger seat and pretended to read the map. It was slow going trying to weave the long RV around rows of abandoned cars and trees knocked over by windstorms. Jack stabbed at the off button on the radio but then smiled tightly at Will so he wouldn't worry.

When they finally made it back to the farm, Will changed out of his best clothes, such as they were, and was sent to feed and water their goats and chickens while Jack made dinner. It was clear Jack didn't mind if he took his time.

When would he ever see them all again? It's not that he thought about it all the time before but he sometimes wondered how everyone was getting on. Now that he knew, he wanted more. He wanted to know what presents his little nephew got and whether Randall would get a chance to test out his latest contraption. He wished he'd had more time to catch up with Bedelia and Abigail and even Peter. He felt his heart starting to clench and immediately focused back on pumping water.

Randall's birthday was in November. Maybe they could go back for that. Or maybe the next time Zeller and Price came out he could go back with them for a day or two. Not that Jack would ever let that happen. Will had practically fainted after an hour. But maybe if Bella went too...

He'd definitely borrow some books. He would ask Price and Zeller now that he knew Hannibal wasn't furious with him anymore. What had he wasted five years of his life doing? Yes, they needed chickens and goats and fish and vegetables to live. But the endless tedium of taking care of them was rotting his brain. Making him start to hallucinate even.

How else to explain his brain digging up some random Renaissance painting that Hannibal liked and sticking it in his dream? He must have seen it when he was living there and forgotten about it.

If none of this had happened, maybe Hannibal would have travelled with them and taken them to see the real thing. He'd started out in a world where they could have hopped on a plane and been in Europe in not much more time than it now took to drive into the city and back.

What did his dad used to say? If wishes were fishes, the sea would be pishes.

Will smiled to himself. Of all the stupid, random crap to remember. His only inheritance.

He finished watering all the animals and topping up any feed racks that were looking low. As he ran back to the RV, he took in deep drafts of fresh air and enjoyed the sun on his face. He wasn't exactly a country mouse but it did have its moments.

Bella was sitting at the table when he came in. Her eyes were rimmed with red but she smiled widely at him and put her arms out for a hug. He went to curl up in her lap – really too big now but she just kept smiling and pushing long curly strands out of his face.

Jack brought the food over and they both knelt down. They were just sandwiches he had thrown together. Obviously most of the time Will had been away he was talking, not cooking.

After dinner, Jack broke out the scotch and wanted to talk for hours about being stationed in Livorno and sitting out in the osterias while all the other Alphas stared and whistled at Bella. She just blushed and looked a little irritated and but let him go on and on about how she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, how talented she was, how she made his life complete.

“We should go to bed,” was the only thing she said, just as Jack seemed on the verge of some tearful declaration or other. Will could tell she was barely holding back tears himself.

She didn’t want to cry in front of them, so Will just gave her another hug and then excused himself back to his little bunk.

He wasn’t sure if he slept or not. He’d tossed and turned a lot and then stumbled up to pee and noticed the twilight and decided it wasn’t worth going back to bed.

He went out to the river instead and let his mind empty. Nothing could bother him in the middle of the stream. The water didn’t care if he was an Alpha or an omega. It didn’t matter where he was coming from or what his plans were. It didn’t know what a total ass he had made of himself at the party in front of everyone. Had the fish even noticed a zombie apocalypse? Probably only to the extent that the water was a lot cleaner now.

He caught half a dozen little herring for breakfast. Jack would be mad if he caught him coming back, but not if the fish were just sitting there when he woke up. Go figure. Either way Jack would eat them but it was 50/50 Will would be told off for going so far without asking first.

If he could avoid “getting caught” that would be ideal. As he came back to the RV, he climbed onto the high stump near the back window and peeked in through the bent part of the shades to see if either of them were up yet.

Bella was up. She seemed to be kneeling on the bed, her long hair curtaining all around her face. She lifted slowly, then sank back down leaning forward to kiss Jack who was lying under her.

He was awake as well. His hands drifted around under her nightgown settling on the globes of her backside. The gown rode up enough that Will could see his fingers clenching into them, kneading them apart.

He knew he should look away. Jump down, sneak in the front door, be grateful he wasn’t busted and get on with his day. But he felt glued to the spot - sure that he was witnessing something important.

This seemed like it was the thing Jack and Bella had wanted to say to each other the night before but couldn’t because Will was in the way like always. The way Jack gently ran the backs of his nails up her arm and under her chin, pushing her hair out of the way so he could see her face and the way she shuffled to get as close to him as she could.

The Alpha ran his calloused hands up and down the backs of her thighs stopping now and again to grip the backs of her knees and pull her closer. She started to rock gently and grind

into his waist, her lower back flexing under the lifted gown.

She's sitting on his cock, Will realised straining to get a better look but an annoyingly pooled blanket blocked his view. He'd never seen an Alpha fully naked before and suddenly he didn't care that it was Jack who basically raised him and that was massively awkward. He wanted to know what he could be in for.

At about the same time, he became aware that he was chubbing up and that his hole felt puffy and a little sore. Maybe he'd been shifting his feet more than he realised? The only times he'd tried to play with himself, Jack had known and gotten mad and told him not to.

Jack seemed a bit busy now though and Will bet he could get into the shower before they got out of bed. He reached down to gently knead the front of his pants. It felt amazing. Like fireworks in his spine. Gripping his own ass felt pretty good too. Except he could still tell it was his hand and he couldn't make himself go as firmly as he wanted.

Inside, he could see that Bella was sliding backwards along Jack's legs and then he could see Jack's huge purple cock springing up under her, slick with something like she had been licking it. He felt indignant for a moment. How was anyone supposed to take that inside them? It had to be excruciating. Will didn't even like it when he was cleaning himself and his finger slipped a little.

Will forgot completely about his own situation as he leaned even closer to the window watching Bella carefully gather her Alpha into her mouth and start to bob up and down. From this angle, he could see the thick muscles of the Alpha's stomach, the way he strained very gently up into her, the far-away close-eyed grin on his face that only Bella knew how to put there.

As they settled into a rhythm, Will pushed a cold hand under his waistband and tried to imagine what it would feel like to have his cock in somebody's mouth. He spit on his hand and tried again getting a slightly more satisfying slide.

It kind of worked but it was too cold and he felt exposed and a bit silly. He wanted to be snuggled up in bed and to feel the weight of blankets on his shoulders and to have somebody else who knew what they doing lighting all the firecrackers.

Then he heard the rattling of infected, much closer than he'd realised. There was a group of six of them only a few steps away from one side of the stump.

Cursing under his breath, Will moved to the other side jumping down and wincing as pain shot into his belly. He couldn't flat out run hard but he shuffled as fast as he could just in time to race into the RV door and slam it shut behind him.

Jack came out of the back a few seconds later with the blanket wrapped around his waist. His grin was long gone as he stormed up and looked out the window. Not that he needed to. The infected were pounding against the door.

"Where's your head, Will?" Jack shouted, dragging him along with a fist wrapped in the shoulder of the omega's shirt. He brought him back to the bunk bed and pushed him onto it.

Will narrowly managed to avoid banging his head on the upper bunk. He sat on the edge looking down at the floor as Bella came into the hall in her nightgown.

He didn't have the fish. He'd left them on the stump. That's probably why not all of the infected followed him.

"I was just going to get the eggs," he lied. "And then they started chasing me."

A full body shiver, not entirely faked, and a few swipes under his eyes got the Alpha in a slightly more sympathetic mood.

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have gone out. I just wanted to surprise you with breakfast." Possibly laying it on too thick.

"How many are out there?" Jack asked sounding resigned to having a hopelessly stupid omega on his hands.

"Maybe six? I couldn't see very well."

"Did you bring a gun?"

"No, sorry Alpha. I forgot."

Jack looked like he wanted to punch something, twisting one arm up around his head and then bringing it down again.

"What are the rules Will?"

"Ask permission to go outside alone, let someone know where I am... and bring the gun if I'm by myself."

"Right, come here," Jack dragged him by the sleeve back into the bedroom. The sheets were still strewn all over the place and Will was about to protest being pushed over them when Jack sat on the edge and pulled him over his lap.

Fortunately his belt was closer to hand than his cane and over Will's jeans wasn't the end of the world. It went on for quite a while with progressively harder smacks that made his whole ass feel like it was on fire but as soon as Will worked through his embarrassment and started genuinely crying, Jack let him back up again.

"Sorry," he mumbled into the ground, wiping at his eyes for real this time. "I'm really sorry. I couldn't sleep and I just forgot."

He knew Jack had pulled himself practically back from the grave to be able to take care of them and he was out from sunrise to sunset making sure they were safe and had enough to eat. It went without saying that Jack didn't get to "just forget" about his responsibilities.

"Alright, pup," Jack told him giving him a rub behind one ear and kissing the other temple. "I know you're going to do better."

Will nodded, leaning into a hug, and then Jack led him out to the kitchen where Bella had breakfast ready for them.

It wasn't the first meal they'd had to eat with the sound of infected pounding and clawing at the doors but Will felt an extra twinge of guilt this time knowing he was the one who had brought them down on them. They were going to have to spend the whole day cooped up in the RV now probably, the clanging and scraping noises giving him a migraine.

He was sent to his bunk after the meal, unsurprisingly. It felt even more stifling that usual when there were only one or two angles he could lie on without reigniting his backside. He picked up his well-thumbed copy of North American Birds three or four times but kept putting it back down again. Sometimes it was interesting, sometimes it just killed time, sometimes it made him hungry. Today he just felt jealous. Even the blue-grey gnatcatcher got to do more things than he did.

Bella, as always, seemed to know when he was down. She pulled the curtain back, knelt next to him and stroked his hair.

"It's all going to be okay, sweetpea," she told him. "You're not even going to believe how great everything will turn out."

Will gave a little snort that came out ruder than he intended. Here he was feeling sorry for himself and being consoled by an omega who was probably dying. Bella would never dream of carrying on the way he was.

Ignoring the pain, he shifted himself half out of the bunk so he could give her a long hug.

"All we have to do is work hard and stick together," she said rubbing his back.

"Don't go," he whimpered as she started to stand up.

She sunk back down again and renewed the hug. "I'm not going anywhere, baby. I promise. No matter what happens, Jack and I will make sure there's always going to be someone to take care of you."

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Jack let him out of his time out just before lunch. Will followed, assuming they were going to the kitchen but instead Jack settled into the driver's seat and started up the engine. Most of the infected were still pounding on the sides of the RV, so he was able to pull forward and up onto the road without having to run any of them down.

"Where are we going?" Will asked leaning forward and squinting at the glare on the asphalt.

"Back," the Alpha told him through gritted teeth.

# Prescription

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal and Bedelia agreed they could move back in almost before Jack could spit out the request. They all agreed there was greater safety in numbers and they all got to save face, more or less. Jack seemed on the verge of asking for some kind of conditions of surrender but then thought better of it.

Alana and her cubs were living in Jack's old house, so they picked a new one on the east side of the block. It didn't have electricity or running water yet, so they still needed to go to the other houses to eat and wash up.

Hannibal promised to arrange for more solar panels and to hook them up to the shared water supply and to help with the cleaning and dusting and rearranging furniture but couldn't say how long it would take. Will thought for a brief anxious moment that Hannibal would insist he move back with him instead of Jack, but the Alpha seemed content to let sleeping dogs lie. He couldn't tell if he was relieved or disappointed.

If anything, their schedules were more hectic than when they left. There were seven cubs under five to tend, they needed to rely more and more on what they could grow themselves in the gardens, and foraging trips took longer and had to go further out. And none of them had seen another living soul since the Omega Academy five years earlier so there wasn't much hope for additional help at least until some of the cubs were a lot older.

Bella volunteered to take over the day care. Jack strenuously objected and only agreed on the condition that Will be her assistant (and alert him immediately but discretely if she started to wear out). Will didn't mind - mostly because all of the alternatives meant being supervised by Hannibal. Not that the Alpha was ever anything but polite towards him, but somehow just knowing that Hannibal was looking at him made Will feel panicky and unsettled.

The only substantial open disagreement was whether or not Jack should still be allowed on the roster for foraging trips with his back injury. In the end they compromised by saying he could drive and cover the rest of them but not get out into any situation where he might have to run or carry anything heavy.

Sitting in Miss Ogle's parlour which had been converted into a play room for the cubs with a door knocked through to Hannibal's sitting room, it all felt surreal Will. Like in what alternate universe would he have ever ended up sitting on a carpet like this one building a Lego village with a little pack of toddlers.

The beta cubs were pretty easy at least. Abigail had three – Robbie (4), Jake (3) and Martin (1). Their mother dressed them up in camouflage and let them do whatever they wanted, which mostly involved wrestling and throwing things at each other, but as long as they had an hour or so to tear around the jungle gym in the morning they would be pretty well behaved for the rest of the day. Alana had the only girl – a three year old called Camille who was a

born diva and did not take crap from anyone, especially not her siblings. She had a two year old brother called Tom who was a little clingy and usually very sweet but definitely had a limit after which he would melt down like an ice cube on the surface of the sun.

It was the two Alpha boys Will spent most of his time chasing after. Hans was the picture of helpfulness as long as he got to pick the activity and organise everything and everyone fell into line. Once everything started going off the rails though he would lose his shit. And Bedelia and Zeller's two year old Christopher was just an agent of chaos. Will felt like he spent half his life trying to keep them as far away from each other as possible.

It wasn't that different from taking care of puppies except that he was absolutely terrified that one of them would injure themselves and he would have to explain to their parents what happened.

Bella was in her element though, bringing out chocolate cupcakes to rev them up and then leading them out into the alley where they could tear up and down on their tricycles until nap time. Will watched her sitting on a bench in the sun with little Martin in her lap leading him in a clap and cheer every time someone finished a lap. He didn't think he had ever seen her happier.

He was getting a pounding headache from all the noise though and it just got worse when it took almost four stories to get Christopher down for a nap. Bella told him to go have a lie down himself but he was determined to help at least until some of the cubs went back with their parents.

At the end of the first afternoon, he didn't think he'd ever been so tired. His thighs felt like jelly from squatting down all day to talk to the cubs. He just wanted to curl up quietly somewhere and stare into space.

He didn't want to lie in the dark in his strange, musty new bed though and then have to drag himself back to the main house for dinner. So he crept into the study, thankful that no one else seemed to be around. He curled up on the chaise lounge and pulled the blanket over himself staring at the red and white stripes in the curtains until he could still see them when he blinked. Outside he could just see the tops of the hazel trees swaying very gently in the wind. The leather was so soft and worn and comfortable it didn't even stick to him as he rolled over and stared into the room, tracing the arches with his eyes, his mind wandering over the patterns of the book spines.

Eventually he recovered enough energy to pick up the nearest book - Hans' copy of The Story of Ferdinand.

His headache was back and worse than ever by the third page but he didn't have the energy to get up and do anything else so he tried to keep going, concentrating even harder on what seemed like very small text for a book you would give a pre-schooler.

He didn't even notice Hannibal had come in and sat in one of the chairs until he cleared his throat and asked, "How many cubs are left?"

"Seven, I think."

“That’s good. That’s all the job requires.” That old familiar smirk was back and all the old familiar feelings – not being a hundred percent sure whether he was in on the joke or not.

Will tried to sit up too fast, got dizzy, and then sank back down clutching the sides of his head.

Hannibal’s mild amusement changed to concern and he came over to kneel next to him. “Are you alright Will?”

“Yes, sorry. Just a headache and tried to sit up too fast.”

“Do you always read with the book two centimetres from your face?”

“I guess so. We didn’t get great light in the RV.”

“Come with me,” Hannibal said holding out his hand. And again – was that an order or not?

Will pushed himself up using the sides of the lounge without taking the hand but then wobbled slightly when he was on two feet. Hannibal kept his arms outstretched slightly on either side like he was trying to keep a top from spinning off on a small desk.

Will nodded to say he was fine and then Hannibal smiled at him and started walking away expecting the omega to follow. He struggled not to groan at the ache in his legs and back and to keep the correct pace with the long legged Alpha who was going down into the basement and then along the corridor toward what looked like the back room.

Panic started to clench in Will’s throat as he looked at the door to the freezer, the medical bay, the light coming from the bedroom at the end. He stopped walking without realising it and fought to still his heart and catch his breath again.

“It’s okay Will,” Hannibal was saying kindly, suddenly by his side again. “I’ve put the past behind me and you should too. There’s nothing you need to worry about down here. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Will took the last few steps with him and was relieved when they came into one of the storage rooms – the one with the big orange sofa. He let Hannibal guide him onto it and then the Alpha turned and started rearranging the boxes. There were more than three times as many as there used to be – probably from all the foraging they had been doing over the years – but at least the boxes were better organised and less dusty.

Finally Hannibal found what we was looking for, set the box next to Will and opened it to reveal a pile of what must have been three hundred pairs of glasses in all different styles.

“I’m afraid these have never been properly sorted,” Hannibal said as if it were inexcusable that he hadn’t found an optometrist already or mastered the subject himself. “But I hope there is something in here that can assist.”

Before Will could reply, the Alpha stood and left giving the omega’s hair a quick tousle on the way out.

Will shifted a little on the sofa, pretending he wasn't straining to hear the Alpha's footsteps in the hall. Then he started plucking through the box and trying on the various glasses. He didn't think of himself as particularly vain but there were a few he discarded on the basis on style alone. He wondered if Hannibal has been planning this the whole time – foraging in drug store after drug store until he found the perfect pink diamond rimmed cat eye glasses to tease Will with.

But of course not. There was no way Hannibal could have known that Will might need glasses – if he even did at all. He'd probably barely thought about him at all the whole time he was gone. He might not be mad, but he hadn't exactly made the effort to stay in touch either.

He tried on a few pairs that made the room spin and his head throb and some that didn't seem too bad. He carefully made two piles – one to test further and one to leave behind.

He wasn't even a quarter of the way through the original pile though when the pain in his head became unbearable and he started to feel nauseous as well. It was going to take hours – possibly days – to test all the options and see if any of them worked.

Sighing in frustration, he piled his "to test" glasses back in the box and made some space on top of another box to store the discards. There was a book wrapped in a silk bag sitting on top of that box so Will brought it along too so he would have something to test read in his room.

As he was coming out into the corridor, he saw Alana coming out of the medical bay with Randall who had a bandage wrapped around his hand and wrist.

"Are you okay?" Will hurried over to ask.

"Yes, fine," Randall snapped at him. "What do you care?"

The older omega stormed off up the stairs without waiting for a response leaving Will looking open mouthed at the beta doctor.

"He's okay," she said with a smile, rubbing Will's shoulder. "He just needed a few stitches in his hand after he cut it working in the garage."

"What about you though?" she asked abruptly, her forehead knitting with concern. He must look as rotten as he felt. "The cubs didn't wear you out, did they?"

"No, my head just hurts."

"Well, let's see if there's anything we can do about that," she replied steering him with one arm into the medical bay. He set the box of glasses down on a chair and let Alana help him up onto the examination table.

She shone a dazzling bright light directly into each eye which made his stomach flip so hard he was sure he was going to vomit. Then she tested his blood pressure with a cuff and clipped what looked like a big plastic clothes pin onto one finger.

“Are you having another cub?” he asked as casually as he could while the very slight swell of her belly brushed against one of his legs.

“Yes,” she told him smiling and giving him a stroke behind the ear before tilting his head gently forward and back.

“When?”

“About four more months. We just found out last week it’s another boy. Poor Camille. The only thing she asked for last Christmas was a sister. And I think Hannibal had his hopes set on another little princess.”

“Are you bonded now?” Will asked, the question spilling out before he could stop it.

“We have an agreement that works for both of us,” she replied with a ghost of a smile before turning and opening one of the cabinets.

“Have you ever had a migraine before?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I get really bad headaches.” Will fidgeted wishing he could just get back to his room where it was dark and quiet.

“Well, let’s try this,” Alana started to unwrap a syringe. Will fought down the panicky sensation that hijacked his ability to reason as soon as he saw the needle.

“There you are,” Jack said coming into the room and Will was flooded with relief even though the Alpha sounded put out with him. “Bella said she hasn’t seen you since the day care wrapped up.”

“Sorry,” Will mumbled. “My head hurt.”

“I think it’s a migraine,” Alana helpfully supplied. “I was just going to give him a quick shot to help with the pain and nausea.”

Jack sat down on the table next to Will and wrapped an arm around him while the omega curled slightly into his chest and shut his eyes. He felt Alana hiking up one of his sleeves and then a sharp pinch in his upper arm. When she was done, Jack rubbed the side of his ribs and kissed the top of his head.

“Everything better now?” the Alpha asked as if the medicine was supposed to act instantly.

“Maybe,” Will said squinting as he sat up.

“Why don’t you lie down for a bit?” Alana suggested. “Let’s see if you feel well enough to eat by dinnertime.”

Jack helped him up from the table and then looked puzzled when Will went over to collect the box of glasses.

“What’s all this?”

“Hannibal thought I should try them,” Will replied pulling back one of the flaps to show Jack what was inside.

Jack grunted and then led Will upstairs, out into the garden and across the alley to their new house. He waited until they were back in Will’s bedroom before kneeling to check on him again. Will winced and played up the headache a little hoping to postpone the telling off he knew was on its way. Instead, Jack just directed him to take a nap and shut the curtains before he left.

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Whether it was the nap or the shot, Will’s head felt a million times better when Bella woke him up for dinner. She had spent the rest of the afternoon more productively than he had making strawberry mousses to bring over for dessert but she let him carry one of the trays so it looked like he helped.

Of course Hannibal had already made gooseberry custard tarts. But he put the mousses on the sidebar next to them so people could choose and declared that with the end of civilization there was no one to disapprove if they ate two desserts with the same meal.

Jack and Bedelia chatted while Peter sidled up to Will and then suddenly wrapped around him.

“I’m happy you’re here,” the twitchy little omega told him without releasing him from the hug. “You’re a good egg. But you don’t look so good.”

With that Bedelia gently intervened with a quick smile to Will, directing Peter over to kneel next to her chair. Will wondered if Bedelia was still just his therapist or if there was something more to it.

No one quite dared to be late but there did seem to be a competition to arrive at the last possible moment before the meal started to avoid small talk. Randall won, bolting in on the last chime of the clock and making a beeline to the side of Hannibal’s chair without looking at or speaking to anyone.

Bella wasn’t having it though, walking straight over to give him a hug and ask what had happened to his hand. Randall just shrugged and mumbled something about snagging it in an engine block.

When Hannibal came in with the appetizer, they all sank into position. There were artichoke hearts marinated in honey and the Alphas peeled them off leaf by leaf to feed to themselves and the omegas.

It was strange being able to see Peter and Randall under the table as well. Like they were having their own exclusive little party that nobody else could see. Of course Randall was ignoring him and Peter kept trying to get his attention whenever Bedelia seemed distracted.

“What?” he hissed quietly at Peter but the other omega just shot a goofy grin at him. Jack gave him a little tap on the side of the head to remind him to behave himself at the table and

Will just stared at the ground after that.

The entrée was risotto with fresh broad beans, roast rack of lamb and little cakes of fried diced potatoes. It was the first meal Will had had for five years where a can opener wasn't the most important utensil required to prepare it. Jack was always generous about offering them food but Will almost wished he would slow down so he had more chance to savor every bite. Especially the little potato cakes. He could have eaten hundreds of them.

Will was hesitant for a moment to eat the lamb but he could see from the size of the ribs what it really was. He wanted to know if Hannibal still hunted but of course he couldn't with no one else around. Did he still have anything left in his freezer? Will shuddered to think about it.

How many people had he himself eaten sitting under this table? Dozens? Did it make it any better that he didn't know? There was no way to reconcile the version of Hannibal that had always been kind and attentive to him and his brother and obviously doted on his nephew and the other cubs; and the version of Hannibal that went out and butchered people for sport. The version that had tried to kill Bev to keep them from finding out.

Hannibal said the past was behind them and they should try to forget about it. But how could he when he had no idea what the future held in store. Had Hannibal given it up? Or was he only on hiatus until a good opportunity presented itself again. How did he even begin to have that conversation?

He realised though, to his surprise, that he wasn't afraid of Hannibal in quite the way he would have expected to be. The only thing he felt sure about was that Hannibal would never hurt him or his brother or anything else that Hannibal had decided was "his". Wasn't everything else worth working through? What did it make him if he did though?

Distracted by the whirl of thoughts and emotions, Will hardly noticed that the meal was over until Randall stood up and excused himself. Jack was obviously wanting to leave as well but Bella was wrapped up in small talk with Bedelia and their host.

Will pretended he had to use the bathroom and then snuck upstairs following Randall into the bedroom. When Will came in, he was lying on his side on top of the covers and in the dark.

Will crept over a lay down next to him, resting his forehead on his brother's chest. When he started trying to hum to him, Randall turned over in a huff and when Will put his forehead against his back and tried again, Randall started to pull himself off the bed.

"Don't be mad at me, please," Will begged. "I'll leave if you want me to. Just please don't be mad."

Randall paused for an excruciating length of time but then lay down again facing away from Will and not saying anything. Will wrapped himself against his back and started humming again.

"Don't tell me how I feel," Randall mumbled at him after another minute or two had passed.

“I do care about your hand... and everything else.”

He felt Randall’s whole body wince and then coil around whatever it was he didn’t want to say.

When he did it was so quiet, Will was almost sure he’d heard it in his head instead of out loud. “You didn’t even say goodbye.”

And then Will felt everything he’d been holding back just pour out. “I’m sorry,” he sniffled. “I’m so sorry. I wanted to say something but you were so mad at me and I thought you didn’t want to hear it.”

That got Randall flipping over and at least he looked confused now instead of hurt and hopeless. “Why would I be mad at you? Other than you just took off without a word after I had a breakdown and practically ripped myself in half having a baby?”

“Because I let Bev out and then everything got so fucked up.”

“Let... her out of where? What does that have to do with anything? That doesn’t even make any sense.”

Will could feel that the confusion was genuine and then it seemed to merge with his own. He’d spent years thinking his brother would never forgive him for something he didn’t even know had happened. Maybe Hannibal didn’t know either except of course he did – he’s the one who put her down there in the first place and he seemed to know everything that went on in the house.

Meanwhile, Randall had buried his nose in Will’s collarbone and was giving him an answering hum.

“Anyway, I’m sorry,” Will repeated quietly. “I really did want to be here but I thought you didn’t want me around.”

“Of course I did,” Randall said picking at the bandage wrapped around his wrist. “I’m useless at this. After like four hours my cub already likes you better.”

“Shut up,” Will told him. “He obviously thinks you’re the coolest dad ever.”

Randall snorted but then yawned and didn’t press the argument, finally relaxing a bit more into the other omega.

“Didn’t you want to have any more?”

“Can’t really,” his brother mumbled seeming to already half doze off. “It’s all messed up.”

With Randall’s heavy head on his chest, Will’s mind raced. What was the point of being able to tune into people’s emotions if he still got everything else completely wrong. He’d been torturing himself for years over completely the wrong thing and in the meantime poor Randall had been on his own with all this stuff and none of it was his fault.

Before he could get further, though, Bella was creeping into the room to remind him it was time to leave. Will shifted himself carefully out from under his brother while Bella put a pillow under Randall’s head and spread a blanket over him.

Chapter End Notes

Birds and bees in this 'verse (cause I'm too lazy to try to work the whole explanation into the story):

Alpha male + omega has either Alpha or omega cubs
Alpha female + omega or beta can have cubs of any dynamic
Alpha male + beta has only betas
Alpha + Alpha can't have cubs
Beta + beta has betas
Beta + omega has betas
Omega + omega can't have cubs

# Translation

Randall woke up with knowing hands sliding under his pyjama bottoms and gently tracing the rim of his hole. He hummed appreciatively into the pillow. It had been a slow few months with Alana and Abigail both wanting new cubs and then everyone being exhausted from the spring planting. This felt like exactly what he needed.

His Alpha was curled up behind him nibbling at the back of his neck, his hot length burrowed pointedly between the omega's thighs. Hannibal brought both his knees up, pushing Randall up into the same position and the constriction of his belly sent a spark into his own cock.

Why did he love in bed what irritated him in life? Every time Hannibal touched him it was like his entire body melted into putty. Being mounted was like being led in a dance that left him breathless and exhilarated and desperate for more.

He was annoyed, he remembered. Hannibal was always on his case to do some chore or other, to drop everything and pay more attention to their cub, to stop doing whatever actually useful thing he wanted to do and blow up balloons for a stupid party or learn how to carve tomato skins into something that looked like roses. They were just going to get eaten anyway.

Better not to send mixed messages, he thought as he started to roll over and get up.

Hannibal followed him around though, one knee sliding between the omega's and pushing it out until Randall was flat on his belly, the older man's weight pressing into his back.

"Stay put," the Alpha growled into his ear and immediately Randall felt a thrilling clench of his entire body and the first sincere tricklings of slick rushing to meet Hannibal's insistent rubbing.

He let the Alpha arrange him the way he wanted, pulling off his top, electrified by the slide of hands over his shoulder blades, propping a pillow under his belly and sliding his pants down to trap him at the knees.

It was just the right amount of frustrating tension as he tested it with a few ineffectual efforts to shift away. He knew Hannibal liked more but was willing to hold back for him.

Once he'd healed from the first cub, he knew Hannibal wanted another one right away. He had some theory about the competitiveness of Alpha cubs close in age being good for their development. Randall wanted a bit more time to make sure he wasn't screwing up the first cub before he committed to another one but he didn't know how to ask for it and then his heat was starting and then Hannibal was strapping him onto this bench down in the basement and he'd had a complete panic attack, crying and shaking until Hannibal let him up and just held him. In the end, it hadn't mattered anyway.

He shivered now just remembering it and the Alpha stopped and stroked the back of his hair. "Is everything okay, pup?"

“Yes,” he whimpered in the sheets. “Please don’t stop.”

Hannibal kissed his temple and then rubbed a cheek against the side of Randall’s head while his hands roamed around his belly and chest knowing just where to apply brief pressure and where to just faintly tickle. Randall gasped as one hand plunged down to his cock, drew back the foreskin and circled his head like a raptor.

Slick was coating his ass now as Hannibal’s other hand spread it around only stopping to give him an occasional sharp slap. It spread a rosy blush and got his hole tingling in anticipation.

He was used enough that Hannibal could start with two fingers, scissoring almost as soon as they entered him and on a mission to hit his prostrate. Once they got there everything else dissolved and all he could feel was the hum of his Alpha’s approval spreading across his body.

“You’re such a good pup,” Hannibal was purring in his ear. “Just stay nice and still and take what I have to give you.”

The fingers were withdrawing but the Alpha latched onto his mating mark instead and the pressure of teeth on his shoulder distracted him from the sharp urgency of Hannibal’s cock lodging as deep as it could go inside him.

Before he could catch his breath, Hannibal was already thrusting. This was what Randall loved and everything else could fuck off. Being pressed under his Alpha’s mass, being pounded into the mattress, trying to wipe the sweat from his face on the sheets and finding they were already soaked, racing to catch his breath, embarrassed at the needy moans he was letting out but then realising how much they were spurring Hannibal on.

Not that the Alpha needed much encouragement. His knot was already beginning to swell forcing him to slow down slightly as it started to catch and drag in the omega’s passage. Hannibal released his shoulder and then let out a long contented grunt as he lodged and then released. Randall loved this part as well, being filled up until his belly stretched with the Alpha’s seed. He wasn’t going to let it make him sad. He was just going to enjoy the warm rush and then Hannibal acknowledging his good behaviour by reached around and stroking him off, chasing more and more and more until they were both exhausted.

Being knotted was not his favorite part though. Even after five years, he still struggled to come up with fifteen or twenty minutes conversation when they were tied in bed together. Today, thankfully, Hannibal was just in the mood to slowly lick the back of his neck, nuzzle behind his ear and tell him what a beautiful boy he was.

Suddenly the spell seemed to drop and Hannibal was sliding out of him. “Time to make breakfast,” he declared rolling over to head to the bathroom.

“Do I really need to see Dr Du Maurier?” Randall asked. He already knew the answer but some part of him wanted to keep the Alpha’s attention for just a little longer.

“That’s the arrangement,” Hannibal told him as he walked into the bathroom.

“But I’m fine now,” Randall half-whined following him and sitting on the toilet while the Alpha gave himself a once over lightly in the shower.

“That’s for her to decide. Come here.”

Randall stepped into the shower and Hannibal wrapped himself around him again directing the spray of water exactly where he needed it most and spinning the omega around to make sure he got all of it. Randall nearly tripped on the slippery floor but Hannibal caught him, gave him a lingering kiss and then chased him out of the shower with another slap to the rear.

“Go brush your teeth and get dressed,” the Alpha ordered him. “It’s up to you if you want to go to your appointment with a sore ass and an empty stomach or not.”

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His ass was sore in any case from the earlier pummelling, but Randall did manage to behave through breakfast. As he rapped on Dr. Du Maurier’s sliding glass door and waited for her to answer he could still feel the satisfying trickle of his Alpha’s come percolating in his channel and dampening his briefs. It was almost distracting enough to make him wish for one of the plugs that Hannibal used to insist he wear whenever he had to be alone with the other Alpha. Almost.

Dr Du Maurier slid the door open looking much like she always did with her silk blouses and perfectly coiffed hair and enigmatic smile that warmed as soon as she saw him. “Just on time, sweetheart,” she said holding one arm out to welcome him into her study. Peter wasn’t around that morning – off feeding the animals.

He walked over to the pair of low blue velvet armless chairs and took his shoes off while Dr Du Maurier drew back the curtains and then came over to sit down. She held her arms open and he curled up in her lap resting his head on her chest and his socked feet half off the edge of the chair.

“Rough month?” she asked with a smile in her voice.

Randall just nodded and closed his eyes, burying his face in his knees while she rubbed his back. He could smell incense in the room somewhere or maybe it was an element of her perfume.

“What’s bothering you?”

He just shrugged frustrated with himself. Five years of therapy and he felt like he was right back where he started.

“How does it feel seeing Will again?” Yeah, not that it mattered whether he could identify what was bothering him or not, she always seemed to see right through him.

“Good, I guess.” She reached up to gently shell a hand around one of his ears and stroke the hairs there back.

“Hannibal told me you two had a good talk last night.” And that did bother him. Why did the Alpha need to stick himself in the middle of something that was just between Randall and his brother? Either Alpha for that matter.

He shrugged again and listened to the clock ticking in the hallway. How far into the hour could they possibly be? He didn’t know if he could drag out the silent treatment. Somehow she always managed to wear him down. Better to get it over with.

“He said he was sorry. About something. I don’t know. Going away. When I was sick.”

“He wasn’t there when you needed him. When you felt scared and out of control and needed him there to ground you.”

Randall gulped back some tears and just nodded. Maybe if he could make it through one stupid session without blubbering like a cub, she would finally let him cancel the rest of them.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter,” the omega rushed out once he felt like he could steady his voice. “He’s here now. And he’s staying or going again however I feel about it.”

“How you feel about it matters, Randall. To you and to your brother. Why don’t you invest some time thinking it through for both of your sakes?”

The omega was silent for a long while, the clock ticks excruciating and distracting.

“I’m glad he’s here. He’s my brother,” Randall said finally.

“And?” Bedelia prompted.

“I don’t know. It’s weird. He’s not some little kid tagging along behind me now being a pest. It’s like he’s a whole person I don’t understand anymore.”

“But he’s still your family.”

Randall nodded again without hesitation.

“That’s normal, sweetheart. We all grow up. Our roles in our families change but the connection is still there under the surface. Even when he was far away, you could still feel it like a string thrumming in your soul. And he feels it too, no matter what either of you do. And that connection is the wellspring of forgiveness, for both of you.”

Randall sniffled, mortified that his face was leaking onto her nice blouse again.

“I don’t want him to be afraid of me. I don’t want anybody to be.”

“I know, pup. But you won’t accomplish that by hiding yourself away from the people that love you. You have to show them all the great stuff that balances out the mistakes and the things you can’t control.”

He was rescued from the need to reply by another knocking on the door. Dr Du Maurier set him on the chair opposite her and waited for a moment while he wiped the mess off his face with the front of his shirt before she partially drew back the curtains.

He heard her slide the door a few inches and then say, “Will, I’m sorry it’s not a very good time.”

“I’m so sorry,” he heard his brother saying politely but insistently. Randall swiped furiously at his eyes to clear the last of the tears while he tried to get his breathing under control. “It’s just I really have to talk to Randall, to both of you, and I know Peter said he had an appointment but can I please just come in for a moment.”

Dr Du Maurier looked over to him for confirmation and the omega nodded. She opened the door a little wider and Will all but fell into the room looking briefly disorientated while he tried to find his brother.

“What the hell are you wearing?” Randall asked suddenly distracted from everything else.

“They’re just glasses,” Will replied a little defensively. Randall could tell he was suddenly hesitant and nervous about his brothers’ opinion and a little part of him relaxed to still have that power.

“They make you look smarter,” Randall risked a tease hoping Will wouldn’t be offended and was relieved when the younger omega smiled and took it the right way.

“I’m not sure they’re the right ones still. I had to try hundreds. But anyway,” he added with a hesitant glance at the increasingly impatient therapist, “that’s not the point. This is.”

He held up an old book that was covered in a silk binding with some kind of flowers on the cover.

“Will,” Dr Du Maurier started sounding more put out than usual. “This is your brother’s time, not a book club. I don’t appreciate you interrupting it for...”

“Sorry, no it’s just... it’s about this Japanese noblewoman...”

“Will,” the therapist took his shoulder and started guiding him out of the room.

“It’s okay,” Randall said suddenly sensing the urgency and importance of whatever his brother had to say. “I really want to hear it.”

Dr Du Maurier released him and sat in her chair while Will pulled over another one quickly to sit next to Randall. She winced as it scraped on the floor, as if the omega wasn’t on thin enough ice already.

“I was using this book to test my glasses but then I couldn’t put it down. It’s like an autobiography. There’s a girl called Kasumi who lived in this village on an island that her family owned and during the war everyone else was killed except for her and her little sister. She was like nine years old at the time and her parents were training her in ancient samurai traditions and how to survive and everything.”

“Will, what’s the relevance?”

“Everyone thought both girls were Alphas, that’s why they were training them. The two girls were rescued by British sailors like three years later and Kasumi and her sister were totally feral but then when they took her back to Hong Kong and she was adopted by her granduncle and she presented, she was an omega. And she went to see a specialist who told her that’s really a thing. That young Alphas that grow up in packs without enough omegas can turn into omegas instead.”

“So what, you think Hans is going to turn into an omega because...”

“No. I think you did because...”

Randall was already sitting but he felt like he was crashing down into the chair anyway. He was vaguely aware that Dr Du Maurier had moved to sit next to him, shifting him over slightly. She wrapped her arms around him and he leaned in reflexively.

“Shit, sorry. Maybe I should have waited to say something. Or told someone else first. I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay, Will,” Dr Du Maurier told him reaching over to rest a hand on his knee and then pulling him over so she was embracing both of them. “You did the right thing and you wanted Randall to know as soon as possible.”

“Is it really a thing?” Randall asked her feeling like he was suddenly waking up in the middle of someone else’s conversation.

“I haven’t heard about it before,” she told him frowning slightly. “But it makes sense from a evolutionary perspective. And maybe it’s only documented in Eastern language psychiatric journals.”

“Here,” Will said holding up the book and letting it fall open to the page he’d been marking with a finger. Randall could see impossibly tidy lines of small black handwriting but at least it was in English.

“She went to a therapist in Hong Kong called Dr. Gao and he told her she had ‘transdynomorphism’ – the ability to spontaneously change dynamics prior to puberty in response to social stimuli.”

“What else does it say? Does it make you sick or crazy or something?” Randall bent forward to try to read what he could around Will’s fingers.

“I don’t know. I only got that far and then I wanted to tell you.”

“Well,” Dr Du Maurier said clapping her free hand on her Will’s shoulder and ruffling Randall’s hair gently with the other one. “That’s quite a lot to take in for one session. Why don’t I see what I can find out about it in my journals, you two finish the biography and we can schedule another session in a few days to work through how you feel about it. Does that sound alright, sweetheart?”

“Yes but just... can we not tell my Alpha? I mean not forever, but, I just want to understand what it means before I try to talk to him about it.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, pup? I don’t mind holding off, even though I’m supposed to keep him updated on any progress in our sessions. But don’t you think he could help you work through it?”

“Maybe but I just... I just don’t want to say anything right now.”

“Okay,” Dr Du Maurier agreed after checking his eyes. “We’ll work everything out and we can even help you talk to him if you want.”

“No, that’s okay,” the omega said hesitantly, sitting up a little. “I can do it.”

# Evacuation

Hannibal sat at the bank of video monitors watching his growing pack slowly wake up and come down for the breakfast he set out before his shift. Abigail was first like always carrying her youngest cub and trailed by the other two with a fourth in her belly for a few months now. He'd set out quiche lorraine with the last spinach of the season for her to make sure she was getting enough iron and was gratified to see her actually eating it instead of shooting like an arrow for the pastries. He didn't like to nag, and generally she was a conscientious mother, but it had taken years to undo her appalling addiction to junk food.

Hansel was down next, dragging a bleary-eyed Randall behind him. Hannibal's heart swelled with pride watching his cub making sure that his little brothers had fruit on their plates and not just cereal and getting up to help Abigail distribute the orange juice. He loved all of his offspring but there was a special place in his heart for his firstborn Alpha cub. He would have to be carefully guided so that he could one day take over responsibility for the pack, but he had the perfect temperament for the role, was bright, conscientious, strong and happy.

Randall woke up a little when his brother came in, Jack and Bella not far behind. Will was still wearing his glasses which he never seemed to take off. It was a shame to the extent they hid his lively eyes and they made him look quite a bit older, almost adult. He would have to see if he could find more flattering frames that could hold the same lenses or maybe contacts. Jack was keeping his hair too short. Longer curls would balance his face out better, as would a few extra pounds, more sleep, clothes that actually fit. Lots of work to be done.

Speaking of Jack, Hannibal snarled as he watched him fill his plate and then made Will kneel for him. It was like he knew the other Alpha was watching and wanted to rub it in. There was no point getting competitive though when he had essentially already won. The other Alpha was all but crippled, Hannibal's home was far superior, he had three mates all well cared for and blooming. Will had a charming independent streak but at the end of the day he would make the only sensible choice. The omega would have his first heat sometime in the next year or so and he would choose Hannibal. He was sure of it.

In the meantime, Jack was a nuisance he would just have to put up with. He could barely keep up on foraging runs but every pair of eyes or hands still counted at the moment. Will was attached at the hip to Bella, who was an excellent influence on him. And Bella was attached to Jack so Hannibal was just going to have to bide his time and enjoy needling the other Alpha where he could as compensation.

Randall was yawning now again and picking at his food. He'd been distracted for the last week or two. Since Will had arrived. Hannibal hoped it wasn't jealousy but suspected it might be a little. The omega had never really had an issue with Abigail or Alana but they were both betas and the nature of the relationship was different. He'd said before that he wanted Will to stay with them forever, but he may be feeling more insecure now that the possibility was on the horizon. He would need to have another talk with him soon.

Hannibal got something a little bit different from each of his mates. Abigail gave him unswerving loyalty, devotion and admiration. She was where he went when he needed some niggling doubt dispelled or had an important errand that absolutely had to be done exactly right.

He could talk with Alana about anything. Her knowledge of literature surpassed his own and she had an easy compassion and rapport with the cubs which he tried to emulate. She could appreciate what he could appreciate but still challenged him and kept it interesting.

Randall naked in their bed after a long day of tiny goading misbehaviours set off an explosive chemical reaction in his brain. The omega's sturdier frame could take everything Hannibal had to give and it was when he was driving relentlessly into him that the Alpha came closest to simply letting go of everything, dropping the mask and releasing whatever was beneath – something not even Hannibal was sure he had seen. And then caring for him afterwards made the Alpha feel godlike, immortal, but connected to the world in a way he never otherwise felt.

Will was his aesthetic ideal – a slim, bright-eyed, dark haired little martyr like Reni's Saint Sebastian come to life. And he was still so moldable, despite all the wasted years. He'd made all his mistakes with Randall, a magnificent omega he adored and had tried his best with but blemished in a way no amount of polish would ever fully cover. Will would be his masterpiece. The last piece of the puzzle, confirming the image of the whole. And his joining felt as inevitable, once he got him turned in the right direction.

Just thinking about it, his hand drifted to the pooling warmth under his boxer briefs. Before he could get any further though, a flash of motion on one of the side monitors caught his attention. A car was pulling up to the gate next to Bedelia's house. A few moments later he heard the horn blaring. Jumping to his feet, he grabbed a katana and a rifle and was running into position.

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Hannibal joined Price and Zeller in the barricaded ex-dining room of the house next to the south gate. The rest of the pack would be moving into position to protect the cubs or provide cover from the other houses on this side.

"It's that twit from the Omega Institute," Zeller told him pointing to the slit at the window they had left clear.

Hannibal took a quick look to confirm, then sprinted upstairs and opened a window. Dr. Chilton was sitting in the driver's seat, although he could only see him in profile and there seemed to be others inside.

"Hello Frederick," he shouted. "Can I ask you to please stop making that clamour? You are attracting infected."

A pack of about ten of them had begun to shamble in the direction of the car.

"Dr. Lecter," the beta called out without fully turning his face. "Please let us in and I can explain everything."

“Who do you have with you?”

“There’s no time,” the director keened, the whites of his eyes flaring. “Please, we’ll do anything.” He seemed to be pushing back someone struggling to lean over his lap.

A moment later, Abigail was by his side with her composite bow. He signalled for her to cover them, went downstairs and told Zeller to open the gate and for Price to follow him.

As the gate began to swing open, Hannibal and Price stepped through with Zeller waiting behind them. Jack joined him a moment later. Hannibal began to hear the staccato ping of arrows being released above them and was aware that the infected had quickened their pace but some were falling.

Chilton revved the engine as soon as he saw the gates beginning to open but Hannibal raised an arm to signal him to wait. Coming round to the passenger side he could see another person. He only recognised him when he spoke, “Please Dr Lecter. You’re our only hope.”

Franklyn had lost a lot of weight, his eyes were bugging out of his head and there were splatters of blood all over his face and clothes. The right side of Chilton’s face also seemed to be dripping in blood.

There was no time to check if anyone else was in the car as the remaining five infected were almost on top of them.

“Wait here and roll up the windows,” Hannibal instructed as he raised his sword and then rolled forward decapitating what was left of a middle aged man in a sweater vest and then spinning around to slash a teenaged girl. Price finished off a surfer dude and then was facing off against a young Asian man when they heard the car rev again and then peal straight at Jack and Zeller who had to dive out of the way.

The car stopped as soon as it was inside the gates and then Chilton spilled out vomiting on the ground. Hannibal was distracted by an elderly black woman, the last of the closest group of infected but he could see more starting to come from further down the street. He put her down, Abigail shot the last one Price was working on and then they raced back inside while Zeller slammed the gates shut behind them.

Meanwhile, Jack had been covering Chilton as he struggled back to his feet. Franklyn lurched out of the passenger seat carrying a little cub in each arm. He fell to his knees as soon as he was clear of the door, setting the cubs down carefully on either side of him and then leaning forward to literally kiss Jack’s feet.

Hannibal felt his irritation dissolve slightly as they were too pathetic to bother getting angry at. Instead he watched the two little omega girls – twins about three years old he would guess. They were lighter skinned than Tobias but had his facial structure and dark eyes. But their heads were covered with masses of loose black curls that could only have come from Franklyn. They would be quite pretty except they were dissolving in tears at the moment and trying to crawl under their omega’s arms. They were dressed in matching pink footie pyjamas with owls on them and were clutching small blankets. Something must have woken them up in the middle of the night.

“Where is Tobias, Franklyn?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” the omega wept, shaking his head. “Please help us. Maybe you can go back for him.”

“If you wouldn’t mind, I could use a drink,” Chilton prompted, his voice cracking slightly despite his carefully composed expression.

Jack signalled for them to follow him into Bedelia’s sitting room as if a) it was his house and b) he still had a vote on their Alpha Council. Some things never changed. As Jack helped Franklyn to his feet, Hannibal noticed the heavy swelling of the omega’s belly. He would whelp another cub in a month or two.

After he’d been shot, when he’d had a few months to recover and had headspace for something besides new fatherhood and worrying about Will being stolen, Hannibal had once or twice felt something close to guilt for abandoning Franklyn at the Institute. The omega made his skin crawl, but so did the Alpha he’d left him with. He was glad to see that Franklyn had made the best of the situation and even seemed devoted to his mate.

Hannibal signalled for Zeller to go find Bedelia and to tell the others that the immediate danger was over.

Once inside, Chilton made a beeline for the sideboard and helped himself to about three drams of whiskey. Meanwhile Franklyn sank into one of the chairs with the cubs burrowing themselves into either side of him. Price offered him a glass of water but his hands shook so badly when he took it that barely any made it into his mouth.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Hannibal asked, sitting in the chair across from Franklyn and folding his hands and legs. As he expected, the omega calmed at little at the familiar positioning.

“We were all asleep,” Franklyn said. “I don’t know. It happened really fast. I woke up and Tobias was on the floor next to the bed and this... thing was crouched over him, beating him in the head. There was blood flying everywhere but I think he was still breathing. It looked kind of like a man, but it was massive, like a giant, and he wasn’t wearing any clothes but he had some kind of tattoo on his back. I could just see the different colours in the moonlight but I couldn’t tell what the design was. Then he grabbed my hair and he was dragging me down to one of the cells in the basement. It was agony. Look,” Franklyn pointed at what seemed to be an unremarkable section of his scalp.

“That looks very painful,” Hannibal agreed. “What happened next?”

“Freddy was already in the cell next to me. I was begging the monster not to hurt my girls and he said we would all be fine as long as we obeyed him. He went upstairs and brought them down wrapped up in their blankets and sheets like they were curds in a cheesecloth,” Franklyn paused to swipe at the tears on his face and blow his nose so Chilton carried on.

“We didn’t get a good look at him. I think he was white. But he had something on his head. He was massive, definitely an Alpha. He must have killed Brown before he could warn us.

He was supposed to be on watch but he was probably drunk like usual. I woke up when my bedroom door was opening and then he slammed me in the side of the face before I knew what was happening. He had something on his hands. Like claws," Chilton pointed to three long parallel cuts on his cheek.

"He left the girls with me and told me to keep them quiet," Franklyn sobbed. "And he went back upstairs. Freddy still had the master key..."

"He didn't bother to frisk me. He must have assumed because I was in bed in my pyjamas I didn't have anything on me, but I keep it around my neck just in case," Chilton clarified, holding up a piece of string partially covered by his shirt with one hand as he refilled his glass with the other.

"So Freddy unlocked the cells and we just high tailed it in the opposite direction. We ran through the woods for half the night until we finally found a car that still had some gas in it. I wanted to go back for Tobias so bad but I had to make sure my little shefele were safe."

As if on cue, the omega cubs started wailing and by the time Franklyn had settled them with promises of lollipops, Bedelia arrived with Alana and Will hot on her heels.

"You need some rest and a chance to get cleaned up," Bedelia decided as soon as she saw them. "We'll make up some rooms for you upstairs."

Alana took Chilton to the medical bay to stitch up his face and Will was sent to fetch some spare pull ups and soft toys to make the cubs comfortable and a change of clothes for Franklyn.

Once the new arrivals were all settled into rooms upstairs, Hannibal met with Bedelia back in the sitting room. Annoyingly, Jack insisted on sitting in and offering his opinion as if he had never left.

"Whoever it was could have followed them here," Hannibal stated the obvious. Chilton had been adamant that he had checked many times to ensure they weren't being tailed but Hannibal wasn't convinced he could tell the difference.

"We should go back to the Institute," Jack inserted. "Go in heavy. It sounds like there was only one of him and he only got the drop on them because they were unprepared. There may be survivors. At least we would know for sure. And even if there aren't, there could be some clues to his identity."

"If he did follow them, we need everyone here to guard the house," Hannibal insisted.

"What you think, Dr. Du Maurier?" Jack appealed to the third Alpha to break the 'tie'. Hannibal ground his teeth in annoyance.

"We should try to find out what happened at the Institute and see if we can track him down. It's better than sitting around in the dark. But we'll double our watch roster here and keep the cubs and the omegas together in the big house until we catch him. Jack, you should go with

Price and Zeller since you have the most experience with crime scenes. Bring back anyone alive and, if not, see if you can pick up his trail. None of us will be safe until he's put down."

Jack nodded, seemingly happy to get on with his marching orders, while Hannibal's eyes narrowed. He could see he had some work to do with Bedelia in the near future but now was not the time. Jack was already storming off barking orders at the betas and Bedelia had settled herself on the sofa looking steadily at him with her most obstinate expression.

He would make sure the cubs were still secure and not upset and then he and Abigail would go back over all of their defences. They were better fortified than the Omega Institute but primarily against brainless zombies who couldn't climb anything. A really determined adversary would not need to be particularly clever to find a hole somewhere given the size of the perimeter. As he strode back to the main house calling the dogs to him, Hannibal felt the old familiar rush of excitement at the thought that he might try. It had been far too long.

# Preoccupation

Will yawned before he could stop himself and several of the younger cubs sitting in a semi-circle around him yawned back.

“He didn’t say Simon says, you’re out!” Hans crowed triumphantly pointing directly at Christopher. Tom, sitting next to him, was also caught mid-yawn and burst into tears while the younger Alpha cub glowered and beat his fists into the carpet, prelude to his third or fourth tantrum of the day.

God dammit, Will thought. Usually when Bella was there they could each entertain a group of three or four and keep the chief antagonists separated but Bella had had a massive coughing fit complete with tiny blood flecks that Will spotted on her hand before she could hide it. Jack had already left and wasn’t around to insist but even Bella could see that she needed to lie down for the afternoon.

He would kill for a nap himself about now but he couldn’t leave all seven cubs alone with either Peter or Randall. Peter would smile and nod and gush about how cute they were while they tore each other limb from limb and Randall would get frustrated and wander off to avoid snapping at them while everything spiralled out. Abigail was working on their defences with Hannibal and Alana and Bedelia were both taking care of the new arrivals. Will would just have to grit his way through it. The Alphas and betas were all chronically sleep deprived and had to work hard all day too doing things they didn’t necessarily enjoy.

All the cubs were on edge from being swept away suddenly to hide in the basement for half the morning and then being kept together in the play room all afternoon past when they would normally be going back to their parents and their own homes.

Fortunately, Bedelia swooped in to the rescue. Twenty minutes of energetic dancing, a few trays of snacks, two stories and all the cubs were out for the count.

Will was about to gratefully join them, when Bedelia pulled him aside saying it would be fine for Peter to supervise them while they slept and could he come with her please. He trailed behind her a little, noticing that they were headed for her house and wondering if he was possibly in trouble for something.

Any worries were dispelled though when, at her door, she turned, gave him a reassuring stroke on the back of the neck and asked, “Is everything okay Will?”

“Yes,” he said, trying to convey sincerity but with another yawn breaking in. “Sorry. ‘M just tired.”

“Do you like working with the cubs?”

“Yes. It’s alright. I just get tired. I’m not used to being around so many people all the time I guess.”

“Just let us know if you need help with anything. Nobody wants to see you wearing yourself out.”

Will just shrugged, grateful for the glasses. He lifted one hand to adjust them on the bridge of his nose to avoid having to look directly at her.

“I was hoping you could help me with one other thing though.” As she led him inside, he saw Jack standing in the kitchen looking sombre. He must have just gotten back from the Institute.

“What happened?”

“Franklyn’s mate passed away,” Jack told him clearing his throat.

Will had never been a fan of the pushy omega and Mr Budge had always given him the creeps the way he always insisted on holding his shoulders during piano lessons but he was still sorry to hear what had happened.

“We were hoping you could help us tell him,” Bedelia added. “But only if you’re feeling up to it. You have such a good way with people, I know you could help him accept it and feel better.”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. He didn’t know how she could come to the conclusion that he was good with people. He’d barely seen any besides the two he lived with for years and before that most people thought he was standoffish and rude.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Jack said offering an out he was about to take but then Bedelia stepped in again.

“Why don’t you just come along and if you don’t want to say anything, you don’t have to?”

Will couldn’t think of any excuse after that so just nodded and slowly followed them upstairs to Franklyn’s new room. It was the same one he’d stayed in before facing in to the central alley with a view out to the little clutch of cherry trees in the garden and the church tower in the distance.

The cubs were both asleep on the bed, but Franklyn was sitting in an armchair by the window chewing on his cuticles. He stood up as soon as they entered and asked, “Did you find him?”

Will winced, certain that the cubs would wake up but neither one stirred.

“Franklyn, why don’t we go next door for a second and let the cubs rest,” Bedelia suggested.

“Please just tell me now,” Franklyn begged. “Whatever you have to say, I can’t wait another second to hear it and I can’t bear to let my bunnies out of my sight after everything that’s happened.”

“I’m very sorry,” Jack started but Franklyn was already wailing. The twins started up and began sobbing as well. Bedelia collected them and carried them into the hall, pacing back and forth in front of the door bouncing and trying to calm them.

Franklyn sank back into the armchair with his hands over his head while Jack tried to come up with something to say.

“It looked like it was over quickly,” Jack offered. “I don’t think he suffered.”

The distraught omega continued to wail and waved away the box of tissues Jack offered him. The cubs were screaming so loudly and struggling to be put down, so Jack went for a second to see if he could help Bedelia calm them down.

“He obviously loved you a lot,” Will tried. “If he died trying to protect you.”

Franklyn caught his breath, and Will was afraid he would start again even louder, but he just hiccuped, swiped a tissue across his face and said, “he did.”

“We’re so sorry, Franklyn,” Bedelia said returning and handing him the writhing, sobbing cubs who calmed as soon as they were in his lap.

“I mean we didn’t always see eye to eye. He definitely needed his space. But he was my best friend.” Franklyn took in another racking breath but then released it slowly.

“You’re not all alone again,” Will told him. “You have your cubs now.”

“And we’ll help look after you,” Jack promised.

“You’ve more than proved you deserve a place in the group,” Will added. “I’m sure Hannibal will agree.”

The omega calmed a little after that and managed to settle the twins. Will asked him questions about them and he was eager to brag about how clever they were and how advanced their potty training was even though they were only three. They’d named them Aoide, the muse of song, and Isolde, after Tobias’s favourite opera part. He was sure the next cub was going to be an Alpha and he would name him after his sire. Bedelia brought up a tray of dinner for Franklyn and the cubs and promised to sit with him for the rest of the night.

Will followed Jack home where Bella had recovered enough to put on a good show for the Alpha. Will had promised not to say anything as long as she was better soon to avoid worrying him even more. But it was hard to tell how much she was putting on the show for him as well.

Jack wasn’t buying it and sent Will to bring some food back for them when Bella tried to stand up. Will dragged himself back to Hannibal’s kitchen, more than ready to pack it in for the day and praying that he wouldn’t run into anyone who would make him talk to them.

Unfortunately, he stepped into the kitchen just as Hannibal was coming in to retrieve the desserts.

“Will,” the Alpha said pleasantly surprised.

The omega tried to grasp for the right response but they were all slipping through his fingers. Not Sir, or Alpha, or even Hannibal – too familiar. He was conscious that his lips were

moving with no sound coming out like a landed fish.

Meanwhile the Alpha had come around the kitchen island to feel his forehead.

“Are you all right, pup?” He shivered at the large hands encasing both sides of his head. They dropped and then Hannibal was pulling a tray of apricots pies out of the oven

“Yes. Um. Just getting...” he pointed at the fridge.

“Did you want something to eat? Why don’t you come sit at the table with us? We’re starting dessert but there’s plenty left for you.”

Will shifted on his feet again. “For Bella...” he started.

“Ah, I see,” Hannibal said with a smile as he directed the omega to sit on one of the stools. “Just wait here for a moment.”

Will considered fleeing in embarrassment as soon as Hannibal went back into the dining room but the Alpha was back a second later carrying four trays of food that he began packing up into glass containers.

“Some roast squab and red current sauce,” the Alpha explained as he arranged everything artistically. “I’m afraid this is likely to be the last asparagus of the season. It’s been very popular with the cubs. I may have to force some next year to extend the season. If you keep it out of the sunlight it retains an elegant pearly white colour and a sweeter flavour.”

Will concentrated on not letting on that the room was spinning and he just wanted to lie down somewhere dark and alone.

“Come on now,” Hannibal was saying now. He had the containers stacked in a string bag and was motioning Will to follow him into the garden.

“I can take them,” the omega replied, surging to his feet again. “You don’t have to keep everyone waiting.”

“Nonsense,” the Alpha replied. “You should not be outside by yourself in this condition, let alone in the current circumstances. I will speak to Jack about it.”

“Please don’t,” Will was begging before he realised it. “He has so many other things to worry about.”

“You deserve to be worried about too, Will,” the Alpha replied. “But if you ask me not to say anything, I won’t.”

“Please,” was all the omega could manage back.

“Your wish is my command,” Hannibal replied holding open the garden gate for him.

Will followed him up to the back patio of Jack’s house feeling completely superfluous. Hannibal knocked on the side of the French doors and a moment later Jack was opening them

with a quizzical look at the omega.

“Will said Bella was hungry so we packed up some dinner for you,” Hannibal explained holding up the bag of food. “I hope you won’t hesitate in the future to ask if Bella is not feeling up to coming to the main house. I am always happy to prepare extra. In fact, it would be safer for the omegas to be in the main house and more comfortable for them as well to have the convenience of electricity and running water. There is plenty of room.”

“Thank you for the food, but that’s quite all right, Dr Lecter,” Jack responded taking the bag with one arm and letting Will slip under the one holding the door open. “I think we can manage.”

Hannibal held his hands up. “Far be it from me to insist. However, the invitation is always open.”

With that he turned and was walking away. Will caught himself admiring the fit of the back of his vest, just as Jack closed the doors, pulled the curtains and then led him back to the dining room without another word.

*****

Despite his earlier exhaustion, Will slept fitfully. He could hear Bella coughing and moaning throughout the night and Jack pacing in the hallways and up and down the stairs to get water.

When he stumbled down for breakfast, he could see Jack had already made a run to the main house. There were some trays of fresh fruit and pastries and three glasses of milk that was still cold.

Jack had gone back upstairs to tend to Bella. He’d also left his tablet unlocked on the table. Will picked it up and started to flick through the photos – the guard from the Omega Institute and Mr Budge, the piano teacher. He had to assume from their clothes though. Their faces were just bloody pulp and they had shards of mirrors placed over their eyes and mouth.

“You don’t need to be looking at that,” Jack startled him coming up behind him and pulling the tablet out of his hands. “Eat your breakfast.”

“I don’t mind,” Will replied digging into a Danish. “Maybe I can help.”

“Bella’s getting some more tests done all day today with Dr. Bloom and I need to go back to the Institute to pick up some things for Dr Chilton, Franklyn and the cubs. They had stacks of supplies that we might as well bring over instead of leaving around for the killer. He didn’t even touch their armoury or make a dent in their food stores. What was the point of breaking in if he wasn’t going to take anything?”

“He put the shards of mirrors on their eyes. He wanted them to see what he sees.”

Jack seemed lost in thought. “Well we do know that the kind of people who are still around are generally bad news. We need to find this crazy son of a bitch and put him down before he picks up our trail.”

“Can I come with you? Please? I know I can help.”

Jack thought about it for a torturous amount of time, popping strawberries in his mouth. Meanwhile Will shooed Buster out of the room after he jumped onto a chair to lick the remains out of one of the glass containers from last night. The container was nearly knocked off the table but Jack caught it and shoved it back.

“OK,” Jack said when Will returned. He almost squealed with excitement. “You bring Max and Harley with you and you stay with them and within my eyesight the entire time. I mean it Will. You be where you’re told to be and you do what you’re told to do or you’ll be spending the afternoon locked in the RV bathroom with a tanned backside, understood?”

“Yes!” Will leapt out of his seat to run upstairs and get dressed before the Alpha changed his mind.

*****

Will stood under the broken window while Max, his border collie, and Harley, a big tan pit bull mix, strained at their leads. They wanted to chase the rabbits which were peering at them from the edge of the forest but Will’s attention was fixed on the job at hand. He wanted to justify Jack’s faith in bringing him.

It was one of the bathroom windows in the Social Refinement wing. The sill was so high, Will could barely reach it on tip toes. Whoever it was was tall, athletic. He’d must have vaulted in unless he brought some kind of ladder. Will scanned the ground for any impressions it would have made. No, he’d crawled in.

It might have been a momentary glare from the sun but for a second Will could swear he actually saw a large dark form slithering up the wall and through the window.

Jack led him back inside where he could see the remains of Matthew Brown. Will hadn’t been too fond of him either – always waving his taser around like a substitute knot. But he didn’t deserve to go out like this. It looked like the killer had dragged him around half the building while he was bleeding out from the initial gunshot. He tore his vocal cords out so he couldn’t alert the others.

“Why not just kill him and be done with it,” Price was asking behind him. He and Jack had hand trucks full of ammunition that they were pushing back to the RV.

“He wanted an audience,” Will told them sombrely.

“He wasn’t here for the supplies,” Jack affirmed. “He’s satisfying some other kind of need.”

Will followed the dogs, mindful of keeping Jack in sight as much as he could. They led him into the bedroom Mr Budge and Franklyn had set up in what used to be one of the upstairs pottery classrooms. He couldn’t help the shiver that shot up his spine when he saw the teacher laid out. The photos hadn’t captured even a fraction of the real horror.

The Alpha's arms had been spread slightly with the palms turned up, his knees bent up and the feet crossed over each other and nailed to the floor. His mouth was wide open with a shard of mirror balancing on his tongue and two other shards over the eyes, his head tilted back like he'd been hit with a blast of air.

"What kind of crazy do you think we're looking at here? Some kind of crucifixion complex," Jack mused looking at the feet. "Do you think he's religious?"

"It's a pose of adoration," Will said. "Like an omega would give their Alpha. Except he thinks he's the Alpha of all Alphas."

"So he wants them to worship him?"

"He wants to consume them. For them to know before they die that they are fuelling some higher purpose. Some transformation. He will go from place to place, consuming, until he achieves it."

Now it was Jack's turn to shiver.

"Well, let's just make sure the next place isn't ours."

*****

Hannibal met them as they stepped out of the RV. Will could see from twenty feet away that he was livid – all but exploding out of his suit despite having a completely blank facial expression and not moving a muscle. Something in Will's belly swooped low just as he steeled himself. He hadn't done anything wrong and Jack had said he could go. He repeated it to himself over and over as they got closer.

But Hannibal's tone was perfectly calm as he said, "William Graham Lecter. I expect better sense out of you than to sneak off putting yourself in grave danger and worrying everyone here half to death."

"I didn't sneak," Will protested and then Jack came to his rescue.

"I asked him to come along," Jack squared off against the other Alpha who had a vein throbbing his forehead that must have been visible from space.

"You asked a half-grown omega cub to 'come along' to a murder scene with the killer still at large..."

"I'm not a cub," Will protested, tears springing to his eyes like a cub. He wanted to ball his fists and stomp his feet in frustration but that would just bolster the case against him.

"He was extremely helpful actually," Jack said and Will felt his heart swell. "And we need all the help we can get. Will is very observant and has a remarkable imagination that, in my professional judgment, we needed to borrow. Price and I and the two dogs were with him the whole time, he was never in any actual danger."

Hannibal seemed on the verge of telling Jack where he could stick his professional judgement when Will felt words just tumbling out of him.

“I didn’t sneak anywhere. Jack said I could come. It’s not fair to expect me to sit around doing nothing to help just because I’m an omega. You’re not my Alpha and you can’t tell me what to do. And if that’s your attitude, you never will be!”

He stormed into the house without waiting to hear the reaction. He knew it was a bit childish but he felt like if he had to listen to one more second of the conversation he was just going to start screaming. He screamed anyway, into his pillow, and then Harley was licking the tears off the side of his face and he had to turn a little and smile at the mutts that had all assembled at the side of the bed looking at him with concern.

He couldn’t help smiling at his little band of strays. At least they loved and respected him. They didn’t look at him and see some fragile little teacup that needed to be lovingly packed away in bubblewrap and only brought out for special occasions. He couldn’t believe that he’d shouted at the Alphas like that but there wasn’t a word of it that he wanted to take back.

There was no vague amorphous ‘society’ anymore telling him what he had to be. And nobody was going to look him in the face and tell him his only destiny was to be a brood mare. He knew he was in love with Hannibal. What else to call the way his insides turned out every time he saw him? But the thought of giving up his entire life to be with him made him feel ill. Why could Jack, and even Bedelia, see that he was capable of so much more but the one person he needed to see it couldn’t? He wanted to scream again it was so unfair.

Instead he went to curl up with Bella who seemed to have recovered a bit after a day of rest.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked rubbing his back and pushing his curls behind his ears.

“Has Jack changed at all since you’ve been mated?”

“Yes,” Bella replied laughing. “You should have seen the state of his refrigerator when I first moved in. The man thought the only food groups were pizza, canned soup and potato chips.”

“What did you have to do?” Will asked looking up at her.

“Just be yourself and be patient, sweetpea. Sometimes it’s like the river smoothing down the rocks, but if it’s going to work out, it will.”

# Infiltration

Will was sitting on the floor of the cabin which seemed roasting hot even though it was the middle of winter and the fireplace was on the opposite side of the room. There were still icicles on the windows but it was too dark to see anything else. He was in a child's body maybe six or seven. He could hear tentative notes from Bach's Minuet in G major being played on a harpsichord somewhere far away.

There was another boy about the same age sitting next to him, flaxen haired, red eyed and trembling but not entirely with fear. He was clutching a big grey teddy bear so hard his knuckles looked like they might snap. On a whim Will reached out to touch it and the other boy snarled at him and pulled it away.

"It's Mischa's," he hissed. "You can't have it."

There was a clinking sound and then Will could see that the other boy's leg was shackled to a thick steel pipe. There were deep red welts on his leg where the cuff had been rubbing against it but he quickly shifted his leg so that his trousers covered them again.

The ceiling above them was creaking and a little shower of dust fell down on them but Will was too terrified to sneeze. It felt like everything was closing in on him.

"What is it?" he whispered, paralysed with dread as he realised the creaking was getting closer to the stairs.

"The great red dragon," the other boy told him forlornly, his voice hoarse. "He ripped her away, right out of my arms, and now he's going to gobble us all up."

The creaking was on the stairs now and Will could hear a great bellowing intake of breath, the growling, cracking exhale, the flapping and rush of air as it tucked its wings to fit in the stairwell.

He screwed his eyes closed but there was nothing he could do about his ears. Both of his arms were wrapped around the other boy and he didn't think he would ever be able to move them. He was distress crying but it didn't stop the forceful stomping of the dragon as it crossed the tiny room, the floor tremoring below them and then its scorching breath wrapping around him and the other boy clinging to his neck.

*****

Will shot awake, his body so plastered in sweat he thought for a moment that he'd wet himself. When the cool night air hit his skin he started to shake uncontrollably. His mattress and pillows were soaked. Looking out the window, he could see the waning but still almost full moon shining brightly onto the road. Not a hint of dawn was in sight. It must be two or three in the morning.

Before he even knew his own intentions, he jumped up, grabbed a clean set of pyjamas and was jogging over to the big house. He'd take a nice hot shower in the basement and wash the stink of terror off himself. Hannibal had some spare blankets and pillows in the storage rooms and then he could sleep on Jack's couch for the rest of the night. He'd set the phone alarm to wake him up before Jack so he could get back in his own bed before the Alpha started to worry.

The hot water made all his muscles turn to jelly and by the time he got out of the shower he felt like he could barely stand. Still dizzy, he climbed slowly up the stairs and down to the end of the corridor. He would just check that Randall was okay, to reassure himself, and then he would go back to the other house.

Cracking the door and peeking in, he could see his brother was alone and fast asleep. Feeling another chill wrack through him, he dashed across the room and crawled under the covers only feeling a little bad when the other omega grumbled and then wrapped his arms around him.

"Why is your hair wet?" his brother muttered, still not opening his eyes or taking his hands away.

"I took a shower," Will whispered and then let a long purr out on the exhale.

"You're such a freak," Randall told him before purring back and huddling in closer.

*****

Randall woke up as he usually did with Hans crawling over him and then rolling down with a satisfied hum into the well between him and his bedmate. Today, however, he was surprised to find it was Will instead of his Alpha and it took him a few moments to remember that Hannibal had the late watch and that his brother wandered in in the middle of the night.

"Hi Daddy," the cub said giggling and full of beans despite the ungodly hour. "Hi Uncle Will."

"Hi Short Stuff," Randall moaned, balking at his own morning breath as Will half sat up and rubbed at his eyes.

"Papa says to rise and shine. The early bird gets the worm."

"I'll bet he does," Randall replied closing his eyes again and playfully trying to wrestle the cub back into a sleeping position. Will had already leapt out of bed though and was looking around like he might have forgotten something on the floor.

He found a pile of pyjamas near the door and went to add them to the laundry.

As soon as Will was gone, Hans started pushing his shirt up. He'd been weaned for more than a year but still regressed from time to time. All of the excitement the day before must have gotten to him more than he was letting on. He had a tendency to put on a brave face for the younger cubs but to fret behind the scenes. Unfortunately for Hans, that ship had well and

truly sailed. The slight swelling when he had been nursing had disappeared completely so the cub had to settle for lightly gumming at his pecs and then snuggling under his neck.

“Everything OK, bug?”

“Yes,” Hans replied after a few moments thought. “Papa’s going to catch the big bad wolf and when he does, it’s going to be sorry.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes,” he replied with perfect confidence. “You don’t have to worry about a thing. And when I’m big I’m going to get it too.”

The cub stood up on the bed flexing his muscles with his claws extended like a little lion.

“And what’s Daddy going to do?”

The cub thought about it for a moment but couldn’t seem to work it out. Randall couldn’t help feeling a little hurt that Hannibal got to be their cub’s hero and that even the five year old seemed to have a better idea of how he was supposed to fit into the pack.

As Hans was bringing his arms down, Randall couldn’t resist the temptation to tickle his soft belly until he was squealing with laughter. He was rolling around so much he almost fell off the bed but Randall managed to guide him into a controlled descent onto his feet. Then he pretended to fall asleep again while the cub grabbed his forearm with both hands and tried to drag him off the bed.

Will came back and started to help him until Randall had no choice but to roll the rest of the way off the bed.

They went down to the dining room together and arrived just as the Crawfords were coming in.

“There you are Will,” Jack said as he led Bella over to a chair. She looked a bit irritated with him fussing but submitted to it with good grace. “We were worried.”

“Sorry. I just needed to do some laundry.”

Jack leaned over to whisper something in Will’s ear. Randall couldn’t catch all of it but it seemed like the Alpha was telling him off for running around in pyjamas. Will blushed and excused himself to go back to the other house and change.

Hannibal came up while Will was away and settled himself at the head of the table looking for all the world like he’d just come home from an appointment instead sitting in an airless room in the basement all night watching video monitors. He had dark circles under his eyes after pulling a double shift but was all smiles for the cubs.

Hans had been loading up Randall’s pancakes with applesauce but as soon as he saw his father he dropped the plate in front of him and then scrambled to climb into Hannibal’s lap. Randall knelt beside them and let his head rest on the side of the Alpha’s thigh feeling

suddenly like he was the one who had had no sleep. Hannibal let the back of one hand drift down to stroke under the corner of his jaw.

“Labas rytas Meškiuk.” Hannibal winced, almost imperceptibly, for the sake of his suit but he generally let the cubs crawl all over him as long as they weren’t too filthy. Randall sometimes got the sense that the only thing his mate really missed about the world before was dry cleaning.

“Labas rytas Papa.”

Randall didn’t see the point of teaching them Lithuanian when none of them were ever going to go there and as far as they knew there was no one even alive there to speak it to if they did. But all of the cubs loved having their own secret language with Papa and each other that their other parents couldn’t understand.

“Sustabdyk tai prašau Robertas.” Hannibal looked sternly at Robbie who dropped his finger out of his nose and then wiped it on his napkin looking around with big doe eyes at the rest of the table.

“Daug geriau ačiū.”

“What are you doing today?” Hannibal asked turning his attention suddenly to Randall.

It was his day off but he hadn’t really made any plans. Maybe work on the truck. But that would just annoy Hannibal who assumed he should want to spend every waking moment he didn’t have something else on doing something improving with their cub. The Alphas and betas didn’t get days off anymore since they’d doubled the watch shifts so he felt a bit guilty having one at all. He should at least be doing something really worthwhile with it.

But he was still trying to work up the nerve to tell his mate about the Alpha thing. That felt like a full day’s work in itself. Of course he couldn’t say that in the middle of breakfast so he just shrugged and chewed his pancakes. It was rude but everything else he could possibly say was going to get him into at least as much trouble.

That was Hans’ cue to start begging him to come to day care too. Today Bella was going to let them “help” in the pantry by counting and sorting cans. It reminded Randall of the kinds of useless make-work Hannibal would give him when he was younger.

No, today was the day. And that meant he needed a clear head. He wasn’t going to get distracted or guilt tripped or lose his nerve again.

When breakfast was over, Hannibal headed up for the bedroom. He could get him alone but it wasn’t really a good time because he’d just come off a night shift and would be tired. Give him eight hours to sleep and then he’d tell him.

He kissed Hans goodbye and wished him a good day and then headed down to the gym in the basement.

He strapped on a pair of boxing gloves and slammed into the heavy bag with everything he had until the sweat was pouring into his eyes and all his limbs felt like noodles. Usually he felt relieved to take all his frustrations out but now all his punches felt feeble and pointless. The bag barely even moved.

How was he supposed to explain to his mate how he felt when he didn't even understand it himself. All he knew was he hated being an omega – just sitting around all the time while everyone else got to do everything interesting and being treated like a cub even though he was twenty-one. But he loved being with Hannibal. And he loved their cub together.

What was the worst that could happen? Hannibal would look at him like he was a freak and wouldn't want to be his mate anymore. He'd get rid of him for a real omega who could give him more Alpha cubs. And there was no possible scenario where they split up and Hannibal let him keep Hans. He'd be on his own. But maybe that was better for the cub. It's not like he was ever going to win any "omega of the year" awards. He wasn't even sure, given the choice, that Will would pick him over Hannibal. Or that he would want him to. Why ask his brother to give up his entire future just so he wouldn't be lonely?

Maybe it was better not to ever say anything. He'd keep training and see how much of his Alpha strength he could get back. And then he'd just show Hannibal that he was capable of taking on more responsibilities. But how was he supposed to ever convince Hannibal of that as long as he thought he was a useless omega?

More muddled than before, Randall started punching again until he could barely lift his arms. He noticed Will had come into the gym and was watching him.

"You should move your feet more," Will said at last.

"What would you know about it?" Randall snapped back a little harsher than he intended.

"Jack showed me." Will demonstrated a jab-cross-left hook combination but Randall was too tired to mimic it and just collapsed on the chaise lounge with his hands hanging down on either side.

"It's all stupid anyway. I'm not going to punch a zombie out."

"I can show you how to shoot too."

"Hannibal won't let me."

"Did you talk to him yet?"

Randall just shrugged.

"He's not going to throw you out, you know. He really does love you."

"He doesn't say it."

"That's just not his way. But I know he does." Will curled up on the lounge under his arm.

“How do you know?”

Will shrugged. “I just know. I can feel it. He loves both of us.”

“Because he thinks we’re helpless little omega cubs that he rescued and that he owns.”

Will was quiet for so long, Randall wasn’t sure he was going to respond at all.

“I’m still reading that journal. From Lady Murasaki. She kept training as a samurai, even after she presented as an omega. And she didn’t think she was ever going to meet an Alpha who would accept her and still let her live her life. And then she met Robertas. And he didn’t care that she had her own career as an artist and poet even though at the time it was scandalous for omegas to do any work at all.”

“So?”

“So if Hannibal’s uncle didn’t care, maybe Hannibal won’t care either. I’m not sure where all the over-protective stuff comes from, but I don’t think it’s chauvinism. It’s more that he has some kind of need to know we’re safe all the time. I don’t think he has some inherent objection to us doing non-omega things. He lets you work on the truck, doesn’t he?”

“Barely. Going scouting and killing zombies is a lot different than being an artist and poet. He’s never going to agree to that.” And if he does agree to it, is it only because Randall is no use to him as an omega anymore? Why even open that can of worms?

“Maybe. But I really don’t think he’s going to throw you out because you were born an Alpha either. And the rest of it, maybe you can reach some kind of compromise on. You’ll never know if you don’t talk to him about it.”

Randall had run out of arguments and just enjoyed laying close to his brother as he drifted off to sleep again. It was good having him back. For some reason, everything just seemed to make more sense when he was around.

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He’d finally worked up the nerve to tell Hannibal but as soon as he walked in the room he had second thoughts. He was expecting the Alpha to still be in bed but he was sitting by the fireplace staring into it with some strange energy burning off of him. Maybe now wasn’t the best time.

Before he could turn and leave, though, Hannibal noticed him.

“Randall, come over here please.” Shit. That was definitely his “you’re in for it” tone. Anyone who hadn’t lived with him for six years would never have suspected anything was amiss but Randall could tell the Alpha was pissed. He tried to think frantically over what he could have done but nothing recent that he hadn’t already been caught for was jumping out at him.

“Why is Franklyn under the impression that you think you’re really an Alpha?” Double shit. Randall was going to gut that pudgy eavesdropping busybody as soon as he got the chance.

“Randall?”

“Will found this book...” He could tell he was just digging himself deeper but the Alpha sat completely still waiting for him to give it his best shot.

“By Lady Mirakowski.”

“Lady Murasaki?”

“Yes.”

“...”

“And it said she was Alpha. I mean originally. Born one. But then she changed. Because they were all Alphas. I mean they didn’t have omegas. So Will thought that’s what happened. I mean to me.”

Randall sat back holding his breath while Hannibal ran his usual translation of flustered-Randall-speak. “Will found a book by Lady Murasaki that said she was born an Alpha but turned into an omega and now you both think that’s what happened to you.”

“Yes, she wrote it herself. Sorry, I forgot that part. And Dr DuMaurier was going to try to find out if that kind of thing really happens in her journals but she couldn’t find anything.”

“How does Bedelia know about all this?”

“Sorry, I was with her. At the appointment. When Will told me.”

“The appointment you had almost a month ago?”

Triple shit. Somehow everything he said or had to say was only going to make this worse. Randall hung his head and had to choke back a distress cry. It wasn’t fair to use it to manipulate his mate into feeling sorry for him after he’d screwed everything up so completely.

Not that it made any difference in how the Alpha responded. Hannibal shifted over, lifted him up and then settled into the same chair with Randall tucked in his lap. How was he supposed to assert his independence when he just wanted to melt into a pile of goo against his mate’s chest.

“Randall. Why am I hearing about this from Franklyn?” He sounded so crushed, Randall wanted to just crawl into the earth.

“Sorry. I didn’t know what to do.”

“That’s what I’m here for. Why is it, after all these years, you still don’t know that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just thought you might be mad. And I didn’t know, for myself, what I wanted or I mean what I thought about it. And I thought it wasn’t fair to tell you until I knew.”

“Randall. There’s no part of you that isn’t also a part of me. The whole point of being mated is that we work through these kinds of things together. Of course I’m not mad. It’s not like you had any control over it. And you did tell me when we were first mated and I told you it didn’t make any difference. Do you remember what you told me?”

“That I only wanted to be your omega.”

“Good pup.” Hannibal bent in and kissed him then but it suddenly felt wrong. Randall pulled back a little just in time to catch his mate’s frustrated frown. It was gone a microsecond later but he still felt his guts drop. Still, if he didn’t say anything now, he was never going to be able to work up the nerves to get this far again.

“I want to be yours. I just don’t want to be an omega. I don’t mean for the sex part but just for the rest of it. I love Hans... and you, but I feel like if I never get to do anything else with my life, I’m just going to explode out of my skin. Is that OK?” He felt pathetic asking and couldn’t bear to look at the Alpha. Was that even what he wanted? Maybe Hannibal would be thrilled they could stop even pretending he was a real omega. It’s not like he was functioning in that department at all. But if he wasn’t what was he? God, why had he even gone there?

He had to stop his jaw dropping to the floor though when Hannibal replied as if this was a perfectly normal conversation, “What do you want to be able to do?”

“Go scouting,” Randall answered without thinking and then immediately regretted it. He should have started smaller and built up to it. He realised he was wincing, which undercut his position, and tried to smooth out his expression.

Listening to the rise and fall of his mate’s breath for what felt like ages, Randall was sure he was going to say no. He looked so tired and almost defeated, Randall burned with guilt knowing he was adding to his Alpha’s concerns.

“None of us goes scouting alone,” the Alpha said finally. “And I couldn’t bear to be sitting at home knowing you were out there in danger somewhere.”

Randall steeled himself for a ‘no’ but he was surprised by “But if you came along on scouting trips that I was also assigned to and you stayed beside me the entire time that would be... acceptable. But I would reserve the right to veto specific trips if, in my view, they are too dangerous. And I would be in charge still while we’re out there. No wandering off or arguing with me about what we do.”

Barely able to believe his luck, Randall nodded furiously.

“Anything else?”

“I don’t want to learn high protocol. I’m useless at it.”

“Sorry, pup. That’s non-negotiable. Whether you’re an Alpha or an omega or anything in between, you’re still my mate and my mate will show me the proper respect when we’re in public. You’re not ‘useless at it’ you just need to apply yourself.”

Randall decided it wasn't a dealbreaker given the concessions Hannibal had already made and nodded again in agreement. As much as he hated the training, he was usually able to frustrate the Alpha into giving up halfway through and wrestle-fucking him into the floor and that had its own distinct appeal.

"Anything else?"

"I want to learn how to shoot. Even Will knows how to shoot and he's five years younger than me and an omega. And if I go out scouting with you, I should know how to defend myself."

"Okay," Hannibal said finally. "You've made your case. I'll ask Abigail to give you some lessons. We can put you on the watch roster as well as soon as you learn."

Randall looked up at his Alpha and started kissing him frantically to avoid him seeing the tears starting to leak out of his eyes. Hannibal's arms folded into his back like a chair, his hand wrapping on one side around his mating mark.

"I love you so much, sometimes I don't even know who I am. Please don't be mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you, pup. In fact, I've never been prouder."

# Apprehension

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for being the world's laziest updater. Hopefully have a bit more time over the next few months to finish this all up.

“Goodnight stars. Goodnight air. Good night noises everywhere.”

Alana closed the book and kissed her daughter on the crown of her dark curls drawing in the rich scent of gardenia. She started to gently shift her giant belly towards the edge of the bed. Somewhere around the six month mark was when she generally decided that this would be the last cub for her and then a few months after each birth she would find herself missing the sense of closeness, feeling a tiny arm or leg nudging her insides. She tried to recapture that feeling of wonder when she was at her most bloated and clumsy but tonight it was elusive.

Camille shifted after her holding on to the back of her shirt, anxious about being left alone in a strange room. They’d moved into the house next to Hannibal’s for the time being until they were sure it was safe again. Less privacy, but on the plus side it would be easy to grab him to help settle her if necessary.

Sometimes she missed having a real partner – a woman she could share her bed and her life with, preferably passionate about tennis and with a degree in mixology, definitive views on breastfeeding... bright red cherry lips.

In the absence of viable alternatives, Hannibal supplied some of the essentials though. He’d happily, unfussily and discreetly contributed to the three most perfect cubs ever created. He didn’t interfere in how she raised them but would drop everything to help whenever she asked. He removed spiders, made croissants from scratch for her birthday breakfast, entertained the cubs when she needed a shower, kept her company when she needed to talk about something other than Barbie dolls and trucks.

She didn’t like to impose if she didn’t have to though. He was running himself ragged ever since Dr Chilton and Franklyn arrived. So she turned and wrangled her pouting three year old back under the covers.

“It’s time for bed, Doll. Look,” she said pointing out the window at the full moon. “Say goodnight.”

“I can’t. I need Manley.” Right. The accursed peacock stuffie. How did something so brightly coloured and, apparently, essential still manage to get lost fifteen times a day?

“Where did you see him last?”

The little cub screwed up her face, thinking hard, and Alana took advantage of the moment to hoist herself back up to her feet.

“Peter fed him dinner.” Alana groaned inwardly. It was the end of summer but the nights could still get a little chilly and the last thing she wanted to do was trek out to the pigeon coops in the dark. But the only alternative was spending half the evening arguing with a distraught toddler.

“If I go get him, will you close your eyes and get ready to sleep?”

She half expected the cub to argue and insist on going with her. Camille and her brother had been clingy for the last few weeks since the move. But apparently the lure of a toasty bed overcame her anxieties and the cub just nodded at her and said, “Hurry!”

Alana threw on a wrap, grabbed a flashlight and a rifle and headed out into the yard. The moon was so bright she barely needed the light but once she got inside the garage it would be darker. If she turned all the lights on she would wake up all the animals and the clamour would distract everyone in the other houses.

As she got closer to the garage door, she could see Harley the pit bull lying on his stomach but with his eyes open as if he was in some kind of trance. Normally the dog would bound up to greet them and sniff at their hands for treats. There was a little pool of vomit on the ground next to him. Once she had her daughter settled, she’d have to come back out and check on him. So much for her relaxing evening with a Tang-based virgin sangria and some John Coltrane once she got the cubs down.

She opened the door to the garage and shivered slightly. Something wasn’t quite right but she couldn’t put her finger on it. The poultry and rabbits weren’t any noisier or quieter than usual. Shining the flashlight, she could see the errant stuffie on the utility table at the far end of the garage.

She strode over to it quickly, suddenly wanting to be back inside as soon as possible. She felt like a rabbit herself with the hawk flying over. She almost heard the swoop of the wings and then an actual cold hand grabbed the side of her head. She got out a brief scream, nowhere near as loud as she wanted, and then everything went dark.

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Hannibal was in the kitchen packing away the last of the leftovers when he heard Buster barking in the yard. Looking out the window, he could see the little terrier leaping up and down in front of the garage door. All of the dogs had been trained to bark at infected and at strangers but he wasn’t sure how one could have gotten so far into the centre of their compound without tripping up any of the other alarms.

It was probably just Franklyn or Frederick snooping around. The dogs hadn’t fully accepted them into the pack yet. Given everything that was going on though, Hannibal didn’t want to take any chances.

He grabbed one of the katana that he kept within arm's reach everywhere he went now and walked quickly down the length of the garden to the garage door. Buster stood growling under his feet as he unlocked it and then shot off into the darkness as soon as the crack was wide enough. He appreciated the little mutt's bravery but it didn't necessarily make it any easier to be stealthy.

The animals in the adjoining garage were unsettled and started to squawk when the dog ran in. Hannibal stalked along the side wall, the blood starting to fill his ears in the old familiar way. He could see a beam of light in the other garage through the door, like someone had dropped their flashlight. He could hear their breath. The dog was snarling at something.

Deciding visibility was more crucial than surprise, as any shouting would just bring help favourable to Hannibal, he flicked on the lights as soon as he entered the garage with all the coops.

He had to struggle to maintain his awareness of the wider room when he saw Alana collapsed on the floor with a trickle of blood on her forehead. Scanning the garage quickly and finding it empty he knelt beside her to find her pulse. He was finally able to exhale when he felt it, a little fast and thready but still strong.

Likely just a concussion then, her head bounced off one of the wooden posts. It wasn't an accident. There were four telltale red marks rising on one side of her mouth where the intruder had gripped her. Leaning forward, he detected the faint smell of rancid vegetable oil. Not the kind that they used... and more in the hair at the back of her head where he had pushed her.

Satisfied that Alana was in no immediate danger, he began to track the scent, his fist clenching and unclenching around the hilt of the katana as he strode back into the beta's garden, through the gate, into the alley. He skimmed along the walls, staying in the shadows. His quarry had done the same only minutes before. The night air was dispersing the scent faster than it had in the garage though.

All of the other garden entrances were locked, the wrought iron gates too narrow for a full-grown man to slip through, the walls too high to climb. He must have gotten in under the barricade of cars. Hannibal had told Price and Zeller a thousand times they needed to pack the whole underside of the cars with heavy rubbish but they didn't like rolling around on the ground and usually only pushed in one or two layers with their feet and called it a day. Enough to stop the infected but clearly not enough for a determined and sentient threat.

The Alpha started pacing towards the barricade. Expanding his senses, he was attuned to every breath of breeze, every twitch of a shadow, the faintest crush of pebble on concrete where nothing had any reason to be moving. He tensed, ready to race, pounce and strike. Then he heard the faint squealing of a gate behind him. That was the wrong direction. Unless there were two of them.

He melted back against the wall and shuffled a few metres towards the sound. The gate to Jack's house was swinging open now and in the bright moonlight he could see Will wandering into the alley, his pale skin and threadbare white boxer shorts practically glowing against the shadows surrounding him.

“Get back in the house!” Hannibal tried to used his voice and whisper at the same time to mixed results. Will stopped walking and turned slowly in his general direction but didn’t follow the instructions. His long dark bangs were hanging into his eyes and his face was turned down so that Hannibal couldn’t see much of his expression.

“Will, get back upstairs. Now!” His attention was divided between the pup and the far end of the alley where he was almost sure he could hear more gravel crunching. Breaking glass that sounded like it was closer decided it.

Hannibal swooped at the omega who didn’t seem to notice him until the Alpha had gripped him around the chest and stomach and was hauling him bodily back through the gate. Will had been sleepwalking, but his eyes shot open, still confused, as Hannibal pulled him into Jack’s garden and slammed the gate behind them.

The omega was covered in clammy sweat and took advantage of Hannibal trying to relock the gate to try to slither out of his remaining arm. Once the gate was secure, Hannibal hooked his free arm under one of Will’s knees and carried him into the house as the pup bucked and writhed to get free.

“Be still,” the Alpha ordered trying to keep his voice down, although if the intruder was still in the compound their location had been well and truly blown by Will’s whimpering. Pressed against Hannibal’s chest, the omega responded a little to the rumble of his voice by quieting although he continued to struggle.

They had barely cleared the door before Jack was bearing down on them, shotgun raised.

“Get your goddamn hands off him now,” Jack snarled and now Will was fully awake and trying to wilt into him.

Hannibal set the pup in an armchair, careful not to turn his back on the other Alpha.

“There’s an intruder in the compound. He attacked Alana. It’s not too late to follow the trail. Will was sleepwalking and in danger so I brought him back.”

“Get upstairs and back in bed Will,” Jack barked without taking his eyes off Hannibal.

“But...” the pup tried, looking between them and blinking in confusion.

“Shut your mouth. Upstairs. Now!” That got him moving. Will raced up the stairs like the beast was chasing him.

“He’s not safe there,” Hannibal tried to reason.

“He as safe there as he is anywhere else,” Jack replied, letting the shotgun fall to his side. “We need to sound the alarm.”

An hour later and a thorough sweep of the compound confirmed that the intruder was gone. Abigail, on watch in the tower, thought she had seen a shadow fleeing to the north after Hannibal slammed the gate but couldn’t be sure. A mirror that had been propped up against one side of the north barricade had fallen over and shattered, but the trail was cold by the

time Hannibal got out there and he didn't want to venture out too far from the compound in the middle of the night by himself when the darkness kept the infected active.

They spent the rest of the night settling Alana into the medical bay, reinforcing the barricades, reviewing the security footage (nothing – Hannibal was going to double the number of cameras, add laser tripwires), and tending to the dogs that had been poisoned. Price was livid and Bedelia had to sedate both Franklyn and Peter. Hannibal brought Alana's two cubs and Hans over to Randall's bed and they dropped off to sleep none the wiser, Camille's peacock gripped as tightly as her little paws could manage.

Once he was sure that the intruder was gone and there was nothing else that could be done before daylight, Hannibal went down to the medical bay and fell asleep in an armchair holding his beta's hand.

# Limitation

Randall was determined not to sulk when Hannibal ordered him to stay in the RV with the doors locked. It was a minor miracle he'd been let out of the compound at all for the first time in five years. Baby steps, baby steps. A month ago he would have been told off for the rifle sitting in his lap and now he even kind of knew how to shoot it. Or at least how not to injure himself. Most of the time.

It was a tiny bit absurd though. Hannibal was in the electronics big box store ten feet away stocking up on silent alarms, monitors, and video cameras, boxes full of cabling. At the slightest cough he could be outside again in fifteen seconds. But Randall was just going to sit quietly, keep his eyes and ears open, enjoy the blue skies and birdsong, and prove that it wasn't a mistake to bring him.

He'd even managed, with Will's collusion, to sneak a bag of Doritos and a Mountain Dew into the glove compartment for just such an occasion. It was almost like old times waiting for their sire to stumble out of the bookies.

And it was a bit of a bonanza in scouting terms, although they'd had to drive almost an hour and a half to a strip mall outside Garrison for fresh pickings. Zeller said they had a stack of solar panels that probably worked, enough to wire up Will's house maybe. He and Hannibal were busily piling them up near the inside door.

The bright sun was blazing down on the RV though and Randall was desperate to crack a window. He shifted into the driver's seat which was a little more in the shade. Then he turned the key a notch and pushed the button, only meaning to get a sliver of fresh air but the window wouldn't stop and rolled all the way down.

"Shit," he said trying to find the right button again and then there was a gun pointed directly in his face.

"Get out of the van." It was a woman but she was using her Alpha voice. Too late he realised he had left his rifle on the other seat.

When he hesitated too long she reached in with her left arm and pulled the door open. Once it was clear, she grabbed his collar and dragged him out and onto the blacktop. It was blazing hot and burned the palms of his hands but he didn't dare move after she hissed, "stay put" at him, nudging the barrel of the rifle against his ear.

The only thing that hurt more was knowing that Hannibal had been right all along. He didn't have any business being out here and he was putting the rest of them in danger. Maybe he could roll under the RV and try to warn Hannibal on the other side? But moving was impossible. The Alpha's voice was keeping him pinned.

Someone else was running up to them, jumped into the drivers' seat, stepping on his back on the way. Then another one, lighter.

Before he could even start to object, she was pulling him up again and shoving him back in, over to the passenger seat and then she jumped in to the drivers' seat herself.

Randall woke up enough to reach for his gun but found one of the carjackers had beaten him to it and was pointing it in his face while the girl, he could see now that she was a teenager with a mop of black curls around a moon face and tiny chin, hit the ignition, slammed her door shut and flattened the accelerator.

Turning desperately to see if anyone was looking out of the store windows, Randall saw nothing except the reflection of the sun. He pawed for the door handle but the carjacker behind him yanked him out of the seat too fast and dragged him back into the kitchen area, shoving him on the floor with his back against the cabinets.

"You can keep the RV, just let me out please," he said.

There was a huge lurch as they shot over a curb and then turned, it felt like on two wheels and a second from tipping over.

"Watch it Lola" the one pointing the gun at him said as soon as they thumped back down again. He was about Will's age, blonde and so pasty his eyebrows were almost invisible. Definitely an Alpha though. He had on a camo shirt and stood bow-legged like his junk needed constant airing.

"Count your blessings we found a ride at all. If you think you can do better, Jere, you're welcome to it," the girl grumbled back at them lifting her arms off the steering wheel to offer it up to them and then dropping them immediately and swerving to keep from crashing into a barrier rail.

"Maybe we should just let him go," said the third one who was crouched on his knees on a seat in the dining booth. He was an omega, about ten or eleven. He reminded Randall of the omegas from the Institute – all sandy sweeping bangs, bright cat-shaped eyes looking up at him from under them, immaculate fingernails.

"It's too late now," the blonde Alpha replied. "We're blowing this popsicle stand."

"Don't worry kid," said Lola. "Once we're in the clear we'll drop you off wherever you want. We just need to get the fuck out of here."

"Are we going north?" the omega suddenly whimpered trying to look around through the windows. "That's the wrong way."

"I know Jitterbug, but they came in from the south so we gotta double back and get off the highway or we'll run into more of his friends. What's your name?"

Randall thought about making them work for it but decided it didn't matter. "Randall," he answered into the floor.

"Shit, you've got a lot of nice stuff in here, Randy," Jere added with a smirk leaning forward and opening one of the high kitchen cabinets.

Randall punched him in the balls as hard as he could and scrambled to his feet, snatching the gun out of the Alpha's hands as he dropped to the floor. The little omega screamed and Lola started to turn around to see what was happening, forgetting that her arms were still on the steering wheel and ploughing them into a traffic pole. The airbag exploded pinning her to the driver's seat. The little omega was thrown face first over the table and into the far wall and the male Alpha, Jere, slid on the floor while Randall collapsed on top of him.

They both scrambled and wrestled for the gun and then, his nostrils filling with the most heavenly relief, Randall sagged to the side while Hannibal snatched the rifle out of both of their hands and stood pointing it at Jere.

"Get the cords from the glovebox," his Alpha ordered him and Randall scrambled up to the passenger seat without hesitation. He did take the briefest of glances at Lola in the driver's seat but she looked unconscious.

"How did you get here so fast?" he asked as Hannibal hog-tied the blonde teen efficiently and hoisted him onto one of the padded benches.

"I grabbed on to the ladder on the back of the RV when I saw them about to take off. It was only a matter of time before they stopped."

The little omega wailed in pain as Hannibal lifted him onto the table.

"Keep your hands off my brother you fat old pervert," the other Alpha spat into the cushions.

Ignoring him, Hannibal swept the omega's bangs out of his eyes to check his pupils and then gently tried to lift his right arm. The omega screamed before it had moved two inches and his brother thrashed so hard on the seat he almost fell off.

"There's no need for that," Hannibal said in his smoothest tone. "I'm a doctor. I'm not going to hurt you. This shoulder is dislocated and probably the hip as well."

He sent Randall to get the first aid kit and also to keep an eye on the female Alpha but he could still hear everything.

"What's your name, pup?" Hannibal was asking.

"Joe, ah, oh fudge!" There was a grinding sound just before the omega screamed in pain again.

"There you go. That's the shoulder back in place. Randall will just get a sling for it. How old are you, Joe?"

"Jonah... Gideon. I'm... sh... eepers!" There was another popping as Hannibal slid the hip joint back into place. The omega tried to twist away but everywhere he tried to turn just made it worst. Randall almost felt sorry for the little shit.

"And that's the hip. You'll have to keep weight completely off of it for at least the next month, and then crutches for a month or two after that if your shoulder has healed enough."

“Great, just stake us out in the desert and get it over with,” the blonde Alpha grumbled while Hannibal cut the airbag free with his hunting knife and dragged the unconscious girl from the driver’s seat and onto the floor of the RV. She had scrapes and heavy bruising under her eyes and likely some broken ribs but they wouldn’t be able to do a real assessment until she regained consciousness.

“Take us back to the shops,” Hannibal ordered pointing to driver’s seat and Randall slipped in immediately.

Wonder of wonders he was able to start the ignition and back up onto the road but there was a heavy clanging sound that would draw infected from miles around. The RV limped back to the strip mall maxing out at 20 mph, thick black smoke pouring out from under the hood. Zeller was waiting outside the electronics shop next to a stack of solar panels checking his watch impatiently.

“Snot-nosed little punks,” he declared when he saw the carjackers stepping over the girl to stack boxes in the master bedroom.

Hannibal handcuffed the unconscious girl into the bottom bunk and set the omega on the top bunk confident that he would not be able to scramble down with his injuries. He couldn’t even roll over without hissing in pain. They left the other Alpha face down on the bench.

With Zeller to cover their captives, Randall took a peek at the engine block while Hannibal came up behind him feeling him over for any injuries. He had some road rash under his forearms which Hannibal patted some antibacterial cream over and then wrapped in gauze.

“Can you repair it?” he asked, nuzzling into the back of Randall’s neck.

“Yes, there’s a garage just down the road. It shouldn’t take more than a couple hours.”

“Good boy,” Hannibal told him with a lingering pat to his ass while he took a deep sniff under his ears. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Suddenly Randall sobbed with relief and turned around to bury himself in his Alpha’s chest.

“Sorry, I opened the window. It was really stupid. And...”

“It’s okay, pup. You did so well for your first time. You’re back here safe and I couldn’t be prouder. Now let’s go home and tell your brother how you captured two Alphas.”

Randall grinned up at him. Going home sounded amazing.

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Bright morning light was flooding in through floor-to-ceiling gable windows sparking off all the flecks of dust in the attic. Will was lying in a giant rope hammock looking up at the ancient wood beams criss-crossing the ceiling. His legs were tilted to the side a bit where a teenaged Hannibal in his school uniform was leaning against them and then the whole apparatus creaked and swung when Hannibal tilted forward to kiss his cheek slowly working his way toward his mouth.

Suddenly the Alpha jumped off the side of the hammock and started pulling off his blazer.

“I don’t know Hannibal,” Will found himself saying in someone else’s voice. Higher pitched, maybe younger? “What if Papa comes back?”

Hannibal was drawing Will’s arms up over his head and then tying each wrist to the ropes of the hammock with the sleeves of his blazer.

“Your brother is giving him a tour of the school and then they have an interview with the headmaster. They’ll be gone for at least two hours. Put your knees up.”

Will tested the give at his wrists. It didn’t hurt but he wasn’t getting loose on his own any time soon either. Tentatively, he bent his legs up until the tips of his shoes snagged in the holes of the ropes, a light fluttering starting in his nethers while Hannibal searched through the walls of dusty cabinets and chests for something suitable.

“Maybe this isn’t a good idea...”

“Ah ha,” proclaimed the Alpha pulling out some long-striped rugby socks. He untangled one of Will’s feet and tied it around the ankles to one side of the hammock with a sock and then did the same with the other foot on the other side of the hammock. The omega could just about keep his knees together but it was a strain.

“What are you doing?”

Hannibal was up kissing his mouth and the sides of his neck again, the hammock rocking side to side as the Alpha experimented with where to put his weight. Will could feel the first ticklings of something downstairs, his face blushing, his instinct to curl up into himself. It was impossible though. He’d been spread out for the Alpha.

“Do you really want me to stop?” Hannibal looked directly into his eyes only inches away. The Alpha’s eyes were so hooded they were barely slits and he had light shadows under each of them but not quite bags or bruises.

“What are you going to do?”

“I just want to take a look. I promise I won’t hurt you. You trust me don’t you?”

Will thought for a moment. His Papa was a client of Hannibal’s uncle. Hannibal was his brother’s roommate. If they weren't quite friends it was a close as either of them got. They’d seen each other every year at orientation and would again until graduation. Staring across the assembly the first year, a chaste kiss in the cloakroom the second, light not quite coincidental groping when they were dropping off presents last Christmas. It was a natural progression.

He nodded and then a moment later Hannibal had flipped his skirt up and was sliding his panties down to his ankles. The cool air struck around his privates like stepping out of a warm bath in winter, Will blushing even harder from the sensation of the rope rubbing into his buttocks and the back of his thighs.

“You must have seen one before,” Will said trying to keep the conversation going when he could no longer directly see the Alpha. Where was he? He kept trying to turn or sit up to see him but he had no leverage. Nothing to ground himself on.

And then Hannibal was at his side again holding up a flashlight and with a business-like “No. Not a real one. Just in books.”

He was gone again, kneeling on the floor, under his legs, the Alpha lifted a hand up to each of Will’s knees to urge them apart. It was easier than trying to hold them together in this position and Will let them fall gently to the sides while Hannibal sat up a little in between and turned the flashlight on him.

It was absurd to say he could feel the light but there must have been the tiniest bit of heat from it because Will could feel goose-bumps on his mound. Hannibal’s soft warm fingers were shifting the strands of rope to get a better look. He was so close the strands of his long bangs were tickling Will’s inner thighs.

He gave a little grunt of faux discontent and tried to shift a little but the firm hand was back on his leg holding him steady.

“What kind of omega do you take me for, Mr Lecter?”

“The most exquisite kind,” the Alpha replied stroking a little circle on his kneecap and Will could hear the self-satisfied grin even if he couldn’t see it. And then there was something giving him the softest brush in the most sensitive place and he shuddered up the entire length of his spine.

“That’s not just taking a look,” Will protested as he bore down to try to get closer.

“Mmm...” the Alpha hummed as something warm and wet and smooth was pressed into and along and around Will’s furrow. The omega gasped as something trickling from his hole met Hannibal’s warm breath, the Alpha straining for access to him through the net, giving desperate little grunts, the hands pulling his knees wider and wider apart and then one dropping, the Alpha rocking into him, starting to pant now in sharp huffs against his prickly skin as Will’s slick dripped faster and faster for him.

There was an ache, almost a cramp, in his lower belly as he strained to get more and more wanting to touch something with his hands and then the sleeves of the blazer gave and he sat up in his bed in Jack’s house, his hands in padded leather cuffs attached to the frame of the bed on each side.

Wriggling his hands he could just get out of the cuffs. He hadn’t made them tight enough to genuinely restrain him – just to stop him sleepwalking again. When he stood up, his soaked boxer briefs caught the cool night air and he shivered with his whole body. He peeled out of them and into some loose omega pants and a t-shirt. There were headlights flashing out on the street but he couldn’t see the vehicle. It was too dark to tell what time it was – the middle of night, he wasn’t rested enough for it to be morning.

It must be Hannibal and Randall though. They weren't back yet when Will had gone to bed but hadn't been quite late enough at the time to cause alarm. He pulled on some socks and shoes as well and went down to see what was happening.

Almost everyone except the cubs was out in the alley to welcome them back and find out what had happened. Will's breath caught in his throat when he saw the dents at the front of the RV but it couldn't have been that bad if it was still running. Straining to see he was relieved that Randall was driving, looking exhausted though and with his arms wrapped up like a mummy. Other forms were shifting around in the back but he couldn't tell who they were.

Zeller hopped out first like a soldier coming home and leaping off the train before it completely stopped moving. Bedelia gave him a graceful hug and asked where they had been.

"We ran into some trouble but we managed it between the three of us," Zeller told her as Hannibal stepped to the ground with a slight, cherub-faced omega draped in his arms.

Will felt his heart clench and then drop into the pit of his stomach. Hannibal all but brushed past him in his hurry to get the new omega into the house. It was completely irrational but he was flooded with feelings of betrayal. In reality they weren't really anything to each other.

"We picked up some hitch-hikers," Zeller continued as another figure stepped hopped out of the RV, his entire torso wrapped in bungee cords and Randall directing him from behind.

"Hello gorgeous," the Alpha said, pale eyes boring directly into him. Will realised in a second that he still had bed hair, and a flush all over his face, and sweat at the tops of his thighs.

And just like that, Will turned and dashed back into Jack's house without another word.

# Evasion

It was a muggy 96 degrees, the third day of a heat wave. Without enough power to run air conditioning in any of the houses, and after a restless, sticky night not able to open the only window in his bedroom, Will peeled the towels off his bed, threw them in the laundry and decided to spend his day off in the basement keeping Randall company. His brother was beaming after being put on the watch rotation, even though he was only allowed to monitor the cameras and not to stand at any of the guard posts.

There was a bank of ten monitors and you could switch the view to any of the thirty cameras dotted around the compound. They goofed around for a while pretending to catch various people in illicit acts moving just off camera before the other one could turn his attention to it.

They were supposed to rotate the displayed views every few minutes but they kept coming back to the three new “guests” locked in the “guest bedroom” down the hall. The omega, Jonah, was laid out on the bed, unable to really move between his hip and his shoulder. His older sister, Dolores, lay next to him singing little songs to entertain him and bringing him pens so he could draw. She had a nice light Celticky voice but also a neck brace and four broken ribs so she wasn’t exactly belting the high notes.

The older brother, Jeremiah, just paced back and forth in front of the bolted door like a caged lion. A caged, shirtless, ripped lion, not that Will was focused on that at all. God, hormones were the worst. He didn’t even like the smarmy Alpha.

Randall went to switch to a different view and Will batted his hand away. Randall flicked his earlobe in retaliation and then switched it anyway. “You’re a worse distraction than Hansel. I’m trying to do a job here.”

“Just switch it back, they were doing something.”

“Just the same thing they’ve been doing for the last three days. Lying and stewing.” Randall switched the view back. “See, nothing.”

“They don’t seem that dangerous.”

“Well, it’s not your face they were sticking a gun in.”

“Hannibal made them cinnamon pecan buns and they haven’t even touched them,” Will said pointing to a tray on the side table. “Those take hours to make. You have to start them the night before”

Randall snorted and shot a sideways glance at him.

“What?”

“You don’t have anything to be jealous about, little bro,” he said reaching over to pinch his cheeks while Will pulled back out of arm's length.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why would I be jealous? You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“Then why do you go all laser death stare every time Alpha gets within twenty feet of Eyelashes in there.”

Will shoved the side of his brother’s chair to cover his blushing. “Oh come on. He’s barely a cub. I’m sure Hannibal just feels sorry for them being out there on their own all this time.”

“I don’t buy that for a second no matter what ‘Jeremiah’ says. They all would have been pre-teens when this whole thing started – that omega would have been like Hans’ age. But they’re all well-fed and wearing new clothes that fit and have normal haircuts. There’s no way they’ve been scavenging out in the woods for five years by themselves. They were obviously running from someone.”

Now Will did feel a tiny bit sorry for his attitude towards them. It was short lived though because there was Hannibal(!) walking through the door and looking directly at him with an enigmatic smile. Did he actually lick his lips or was Will just imagining it? And now he could barely meet the Alpha’s eyes.

“Can you come with me for a moment, Will?”

Little thrills of electricity shooting up his spine, Will went out into the corridor with the Alpha only taking a second to appreciate the perfect arch of his back under his crisp white shirt.

“Dr. Bloom, Dr. DuMaurier and I are going to interview the Gideons now. Would you like to join us?”

Taken aback, Will just gaped at him.

“I would value your opinion very much.”

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but wondering what prompted the sudden 180 policy shift, Will nodded seriously and then followed the Alpha down the hall to where Alana and Bedelia were waiting, all smiles for him.

Hannibal knocked but didn’t wait for a response before he opened the door. They filed in and sat in the chairs in the corner while Dolores and Jeremiah sat on the edge of the bed, Jonah just visible lying behind them. Will couldn’t help a little flash of annoyance that both Hannibal and Bedelia had placed their chairs so they were closer to the other Alphas than him. Meanwhile Alana not so subtlely stood over his shoulder like she was preparing to haul him out of the room at the first sign of trouble.

“Good morning,” Hannibal began. “I trust you are all feeling better after some sleep and a few good meals.” He pointedly didn’t look at the uneaten buns on the table.

The two Alphas just rolled their eyes and shifted uncomfortably.

“I apologise that we are meeting under such unfortunate circumstances. You’ll recall, however, that we were not the aggressors. Nor do we intend you any harm as long as you can show the same, along with some basic courtesy.”

Will focused intently on the two young Alphas. There were the very slightest signs of relief but they were still both coiled like springs as if they expected to be attacked at any second.

“I’m Dr. Hannibal Lecter,” the Alpha proceeded as if everything was completely normal. “These are my colleagues, Dr. Alana Bloom and Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier.”

“You’re all doctors?” Jonah asked faintly. “Our sire is a doctor.”

Hannibal cut in before Jeremiah could interrupt him, leaning forward with his hands steepled to ask in his kindest, most solicitous tone, “Was his first name Abel?”

And Will knew it was absurd and could almost feel Randall rolling his eyes at him through the surveillance camera, but Will’s heart clenched, his teeth ground and he gripped the arms of the chair a little tighter watching Hannibal interact with the little omega.

He realised he wasn’t the only one. Jeremiah and Dolores were all but flashing their fangs, with a white-knuckled grip on the edge of the bed.

“Did you know him?” Dolores asked levelly.

“By reputation only, I’m afraid,” Hannibal replied, leaning back a little to address them again.

“He’s an extremely well-respected surgeon,” Bedelia added with a smile. “And unusual in his willingness to ignore dynamics in his patients. I had several omega clients who spoke very highly of him after other Alpha doctors were unwilling to treat them.”

“Who’s he?” Jeremiah cut in pointing at Will before the conversation could progress any further. Talking about their father clearly upset all three of them. Is he dead? No. What Will was getting was almost overwhelming anxiety. They’re not sure either way.

“This is Will,” Hannibal said genially, half-turning to give his knee a pat before squaring off against the other Alphas again.

“Is he yours?” Jeremiah asked, curiosity mixed with contempt... but that seemed to colour everything he said. Was he actually interested in Will or was it Hannibal’s reaction he was after?

“He’s one of a number of omegas who live in our group,” Alana answered with a smile just for Jonah.

“But one of you must have a claim on him,” Dolores insisted.

Will snorted. But he wasn’t getting exactly what he expected from them. It wasn’t the stereotypical insistence that he must belong to one Alpha or another. There was something

almost hopeful about the way she was leaning even a little bit more forward, hanging off the response. What are they so invested in?

Hannibal gave a wide grin and replied, “That’s up to Will. When he’s a little older he can choose for himself.”

“Is that true?” Jonah was looking at him with big doe eyes and Will couldn’t help regretting his earlier hostility. Just a little.

“Yes,” Will said. “I’m a free agent.”

And that more than anything seemed to put the Alpha Gideons a little more at ease. What the hell had they been expecting?

“How many omegas do you have here?” Dolores asked chewing on her lower lip a little.

“Five,” Alana said counting mentally as she rubbed her swelling belly. “Not counting Franklyn’s twins. So I guess that makes seven now!”

“How many people altogether? How many Alphas?” Jeremiah followed up with what seemed to be characteristic directness. Will felt like his eyes were boring into him and couldn’t help looking down at his hands.

“A few more than twenty,” Hannibal told him evenly. “Five of us are Alphas.” Will smiled that he counted the cubs in as well to sound more impressive. The façade wasn’t going to last long when they realised two of the “Alphas” fearlessly guarding their compound still used night lights and had favourite stuffies.

Dolores and Jeremiah seemed to be having a conversation with their eyes but Will couldn’t catch much of it with a view of only one side of their faces. They maybe want to ask us for something but they still don’t trust us. The girl wants something very badly but she’s afraid to ask for it. They don’t agree on what they want to do.

“We’re not interested in keeping prisoners,” Bedelia noted. “We’ve been inviting people to join us where we can establish we can trust them and helping them on their way when they choose not to stay.”

“Who’s in charge?” Dolores asked. “Who makes all the decisions?”

“We’re all in charge,” Bedelia responded although Hannibal tightened ever so slightly as she said it. “Let her keep her illusions,” Will could almost see him thinking.

“We have an Alpha Council where we discuss all of the important decisions that need to be made for the group. You would be welcome to join eventually if you decide you would like to stay.”

“What would we have to do?” Dolores asked sceptically, biting her cuticles.

“We all take turns on a roster,” Alana answered. “Mostly watch duty, scouting, tending the gardens. It depends a little on any special skills you have.”

“What did you do where you lived before?” Hannibal asked pointedly. The two teenaged Alphas tensed and look at each other before responding.

“We just lived in the woods,” Jeremiah insisted.

“Randall had the impression you were running from somebody,” the Alpha followed up.

“Yeah, the zombies,” Dolores replied rolling her ears but Will could see she was starting to crack. They need help with something but they’re afraid to ask us. They feel hopeless and alone.

“We can help you,” Will jumped in. “Whatever it is. We’ll try anyway.” He didn’t care if he was overstepping his bounds with the Alphas. Hannibal in particular looked like he was two seconds away from kicking him out of the room. All that mattered to Will was getting to the bottom of what he was sensing.

Jonah started sniffling and even Jeremiah too for the briefest second.

Will crossed over to the side of the bed, evading Hannibal’s attempt to detain him by the shirt sleeve, and knelt down taking Jonah’s hand. “It’ll be okay,” he said earnestly as the little omega dissolved in sobs.

“Will,” Hannibal started to scold at exactly the same time Jeremiah hissed, “Jonah!”

“I don’t care! I just want Daddy back,” the omega was crying.

“Yeah, well he’s dead,” Jeremiah told him as Dolores sat back on the bed to cradle him wincing as the omega buried his head against her sore ribs.

“Shut up, you don’t know that,” his sister told him.

“I watched pigs eat his legs off, so yeah, I think I do.” The little omega started wailing even louder. Dolores was beginning to shake and cry a little as well.

“That’s enough,” Hannibal said using his Voice. Will felt a shudder go through him even though it wasn’t directed at him particularly. Jeremiah shrunk back down a little on the edge of the bed.

“Let’s back up a little,” Bedelia suggested in her warmest tone.

“When the shit hit the fan, our Dad came to find us,” Jeremiah turned to address Will directly as if there was nobody else in the room. “He said we’d be safer out of the city. So we tried driving north but then the car broke down.”

“We did live in the woods for a while,” Dolores insisted, wiping under her eyes with the sleeve of her hoodie.

Will looked to Bedelia, unsure what to say. She made a little motion with both hands, urging him to go on.

“What happened next?” Will asked. That seemed neutral and safe but the omega gave another heaving sob.

“We got caught,” Dolores said darkly.

“There’s this other group,” Jeremiah added for her. “They have a big compound around a mansion and a factory farm. Mason Verger is in charge.”

“Like Verger’s baloney?” Will asked and then winced. That was a random and stupid association to make. Jeremiah just gave a little half smile though and went on.

“Yeah, right. He was rich before and all his guards were paramilitary types and they all survived.”

“How many are there?” “How far away are they? Alana and Hannibal asked at the same time.

“Maybe thirty or forty. They aren’t all fighters though. Some are their families and some are random people they captured who don’t really want to be there. There’s maybe fifteen guards. They have a massive arsenal though. They were training me to join them. She was a maid,” Jeremiah responded.

“Fuck off,” his sister told him before turning more seriously to Hannibal. “I don’t know how far away they are. We were running on foot for like a week before we ran into you guys though.”

“Our dad was helping us escape but he got caught,” Jeremiah explained choking a little. “They strung him up over the pig pits and lowered him into them.”

He sounded so desolate, Will was almost overwhelmed with the impulse to give him a hug but he knew that would be a step too far with Hannibal watching and still no shirt on the other Alpha.

“He could still be alive though,” his sister insisted for the omega’s benefit. “We should go back for him. He would for us.”

“There’s nothing to go back for,” her brother argued standing to face her. “We need to get the hell away from here. Someplace Jonah will be safe. Like Montana.”

“Okay,” Hannibal cut in but not unkindly. “Thank you for answering our questions. My colleagues and I should discuss what is to be done. In the meantime, I suggest you rest and eat something to recover your strength.”

Alana and Bedelia were already filing out of the room. Hannibal helped Will back up to his feet and then guided him out with a hand on the small of his back.

He felt swept off his feet, his mind turning a million gears a second trying to process everything, but it didn’t last long. While Alana and Bedelia went up to the study for the big discussion, Hannibal gently “suggested” that Will keep his brother company instead.

“But I can help,” Will insisted.

“You’ve already been of great assistance,” Hannibal told him planting a little kiss on his temple as he ushered him firmly into the surveillance room. “But now Alana, Bedelia and I need to talk.”

Before Will could respond, the door was shut in his face.

Furious, he stomped back over and threw himself into the chair next to Randall.

“I’m sick of this,” he declared. “I’m the one that got them talking in the first place. There wouldn’t be anything to discuss if it wasn’t for me.”

“Yeah, but you’re an omega,” Randall responded unhelpfully, eyes still peeled to the monitors. “You can’t just expect them to invite you to an Alpha Council. I don’t even get to go to those.”

“Shut up,” Will told him angrily. “Alana’s not even an Alpha either. If they’re just going to make up new rules as they go, why shouldn’t I get to be on the Council too?”

Randall shrugged. “Why do you even want to be on the Council? The whole thing's a joke. Hannibal’s just going to do whatever he wants to do anyway. How much difference do you think your opinion is going to make?”

“I can’t believe you,” Will found himself suddenly on his feet and shouting. “I supported your stupid dream to build trucks and go kill zombies even when we all thought you were an omega. But what, you get a few pathetic crumbs dropped on your plate and suddenly you’re rah rah Team Alpha?”

He shoved the side of Randall’s seat as hard as he could and suddenly his brother was on his feet too.

“I will kick your ass,” Randall told him pointing a finger in his face which Will batted away.

Randall tried to reach around to try to slap him upside the head and Will pushed his arm away and then shoved his shoulder and then Randall tackled him and they were rolling around on the floor trying to punch each other but mostly hitting the floor and knocking over chairs.

Randall had about forty pounds on his brother but Will’s blood was pounding in his ears. And he had Harley, awoken from his nap under the desk and thinking this was the greatest game ever, worrying one of Randall’s sleeves.

Will rolled on top and started landing some real punches while Randall tried to shove his jaw away with his open palm and yowled at him to get off.

And then the next thing he knew, Hannibal’s arm was wrapped around his chest lifting him off and dragging him to his feet. Randall sat up immediately nursing a bloody nose and trying to kick at his shins while Hannibal held him pinned.

The Alpha deposited Will in one of the chair, then righted another one and pointed at it ordering Randall into it with a “sit” keeping his eyes coolly on Will waiting for any sign of defiance. Even the dog shrank back under the desk

When Randall was seated Hannibal checked his nose and his eyes for any sign of serious damage and then asked, “Who’s going to tell me what’s going on in here?”

To which Randall immediately replied, “You didn’t invite him to your meeting and now he’s throwing a shit fit and taking it out on me.”

“Fuck off!” Will shouted at him wiping furiously at the hot tears that were suddenly spilling down his face.

“OK, that’s enough,” Hannibal interjected turning the back of Randall’s chair to face the monitors. “Randall, get back to work. Will, come with me.”

With his arms crossed, Will stormed out into the hallway and then waited for Hannibal to lead him upstairs and into the study. Alana and Bedelia must have sensed that something was amiss and had made themselves scarce.

“Sit,” the Alpha ordered. Will sank into one of the brown leather chairs while Hannibal settled himself opposite him.

“You want to be treated like a grown-up and given a seat at the table, William, but when we have conflicts, adults use their words to resolve them.”

Will just glared at his tie. It was a stupid pastel yellow colour. Seriously, why was he still even wearing a tie?

“Do you have anything you want to say to me now?”

“Yes, why did you even bring me in there? With the Gideons.”

“To reassure the Alphas that omegas are well-treated here.”

Will snorted.

“Do you think you’re not well-treated here?”

“You said you valued my opinion!”

“I do, Will.”

“No, you don’t. You didn’t even ask for it. You can’t just use people that way and manipulate them and then turn around and expect them to l...”

“Expect them to what, Will?” Hannibal was leaning forward now.

“Nevermind. It doesn’t matter. You want to punish me, go ahead. I don’t even care.” Will sat back in the chair, his arms crossed again.

The Alpha gave a long sigh and sat back too. “Well, I said you could have a choice and I meant it. Do you want me to deal with this or Jack?”

“Jack,” Will responded looking at him levelly. Hannibal didn’t even flinch. His mind was completely closed off to the omega. How did he do that? Will hated how instantly deflated he felt by the lack of any reaction whatsoever.

“Very well,” the Alpha said standing and showing him the way back out into the sweltering garden.

Will walked as quickly as he could across to the Crawfords’ house exquisitely aware with every step that Hannibal was trailing a pace or two behind him.

When he stomped through the door and into the living room he saw Bella in her white nightgown sitting on the sofa and Jack kneeling by her side and then flecks of blood all over her chest and chin as she coughed uncontrollably leaning into his shoulder.

Will stopped short with a little gasp and Hannibal narrowly managed to step around him.

“Dr Lecter,” Jack called as soon as he saw them, waving the other Alpha over.

“Go get Dr Bloom and tell her to bring the oxygen,” Hannibal ordered him as he raced over to Bella’s other side.

Will raced back out into the garden without another thought, the heat completely forgotten.

# Obligation

“Excuse me,” Will said, eyes on the ground, as he tried to step around Jeremiah in the hall outside the medical bay. Ever since they let the Gideons out, the pale Alpha seemed perpetually in his way.

He stepped to one side now and swept one arm out with a theatrical half-bow, “After you.”

“Thank you,” the omega said scurrying past without another look. He was on a mission, Jack’s phone clenched tightly in one hand. No time for Alpha drama today.

When he rounded the corner into the medical bay, more bad luck. He’d tried to time his visit just long enough after Peter brought him the news about the big event that Hannibal would have moved on and he could avoid him completely, but there he was next to the bed cradling a little bundle in one arm and holding Abigail’s limp hand with the other.

The Alpha’s wave of blonde hair fell perfectly across his forehead and eyes as he looked down at his youngest cub and whispered something conspiratorial at it in Lithuanian.

“Oh, sorry,” Will stumble-stepped to a halt in the middle of the room and adjusted his glasses as Hannibal looked up at him.

“Hello, Will,” the Alpha greeted him with a neutral smile and stood up transferring both arms under the newborn. Abigail was out for the count, snoring very faintly.

“Hi,” Will responded holding up the phone. “Bella just wanted some pictures, but I can come back later.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Hannibal said crossing closer to him. “Why don’t you hold him and I can take the pictures for you?”

Before Will could object, he had the bundle of blankets thrust into his arms and the phone snatched out of his hand. Looking down all he could really see was a big puffy eyelid and the cub’s fat fist shoved up against his mouth - very faint, almost invisible, eyebrows almost like Jeremiah’s. He’d be blonde, probably. Maybe even more than Hannibal.

“He smells... something,” Will observed wrinkling his nose.

“He smells like pack,” the Alpha replied weaving from one side to the other and occasionally lifting the phone up to take another shot. “Enjoy it while it lasts. That’s as good as it gets,”

“What are you naming him?”

“Daniel,” Hannibal dropped his hands and stood a little taller looking even more pleased with himself than usual.

“After your boarding school roommate?” The words dropped out before Will could stop himself and then it was everything he could manage to not startle or drop the baby while simultaneously not wincing too obviously.

“Among other things,” Hannibal said, his eyes boring into the omega now. Will was sure he could see right through him and into his darkest dreams and fantasies. After a few long moments, the Alpha continued, “I have asked you pups to respect my privacy and not to go rummaging through my things without my permission.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Will tried to cover, handing the cub back as quickly as he could and awkwardly retrieving the phone. “I must have seen it in one of the photos ages ago and it just randomly stuck in there.” He tried to indicate his brain with the corner of the phone but missed his aim and whacked himself in the forehead.

“Ow...”

“Will...”

“Anyway, I have to get back. Good luck with the whole baby situation,” Will lurched out the room, narrowly missing slamming into the side post of the door and then fled upstairs as quickly as he could run.

When he got back to the Crawford’s porch he caught his breath and swiped the sweat off his face with the front of his shirt. In the kitchen, Jack had just gone out to his watch shift but had left a tray for Will to bring up for Bella. There was an oatmeal coconut smoothie, the sides of the glass just starting to sweat in the heat, and a thick book of photos of English cottage gardens.

She hadn’t been able to keep solid food down for almost a week. Jack worried constantly about her protein intake so he’d probably tried to sneak some powder or egg whites in to this one a well. Bella’s palette wasn’t easy to fool though.

Will set the phone on the corner of the tray and then carried it upstairs. When she thought she was alone, she coughed harder and he could hear her from the bottom of the stairs – spluttering like an engine trying to start without enough gas.

She wouldn’t let Jack put extra flowers in the bedroom, said it was too morbid, so he had been piling them up just outside the door whenever the rest of the group brought them some. Hannibal brought a different bouquet every day when he visited. Will sneezed a little when he got there, giving her fair warning, and then pushed his way in since he couldn’t knock with the heavy tray in his hands.

“Hello, sweetpea,” she said brightening as soon as he entered and making grabby hands for him.

“Hi,” he replied suddenly feeling shy. He tried to put the tray over her lap but she moved it to the side instead so he could lie down next to her with his head on her shoulder.

She took a quick sip of the smoothie, made a face and set it aside. “That man will be the death of me.”

“He just worries. You should have more,” Will urged.

“I will in a minute. Meanwhile, I believe you have some important business for me...”

Will reached over to retrieve the phone and opened it up to the baby photos.

“Ohhhh! Look at those cheeks! Boy or girl?”

“It’s a boy. They’re calling him Daniel.”

“Poor Abigail. That’s four in a row. They’re going to run that girl ragged. What kind of a face is that to make?” She held the phone up to show Will wrinkling his nose. Her laugh turned into a cough though and he let go of her briefly afraid to put any pressure on her chest.

“Sorry, I can go if you need to rest,” Will offered.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bella told him, pulling him down to rest against her side again and rubbing his back. “This is the best part of every day.”

“Not seeing Jack?”

“He’s worked himself into such a state. Sometimes it’s too close. His face is all scars if you look closely enough, you know? And then what kind of person does it make you to complain about him being a good Alpha? Hand me that would you, baby?”

She pointed to a drawer in the nightstand. Will pulled out a vapor pen and passed it to her. There was no other medicine in the room. She wouldn’t allow it.

“Well,” she continued after a long draw, “she would have had an easier time of it than Franklyn did last week. That Tobias Junior has a head the size of a volleyball. I was still in the room next door when he started whelping and you would have thought he was a hen laying a full-grown turkey.”

Will smiled looking up at her while Bella stroked his hair back.

“Does it hurt a lot?”

“Going out or going in? Full disclosure, I’ve only tried the one.”

“Going in.”

“Not if he knows what he’s doing and don’t ever let him get away with telling you otherwise.” She winked at him and took another long draw.

“Isn’t it supposed to hurt though sometimes? I mean, isn’t that part of it?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“Sorry, that’s a stupid thing to ask. I should let you sleep.” Will started to move back up again but Bella pulled him back.

“Oh, no. You’re not getting out of it that easily young man. Where is all of this coming from?”

Will gulped slightly. Bella had explained to him the broad outlines two or three years before and told him he was free to ask her any questions he wanted but he’d never really had the nerve to take her up on it before. It was wrong to be discussing this when she was sick, but how many other opportunities was he ever going to have?

“It’s just this book I was reading. It’s a journal by this omega. And she writes sometimes about, you know, doing it. And the things she likes. Like sometimes not being able to move or being tied up and sometimes it hurts but not in a bad way or she wants to do it after a spanking. I don’t really understand it.”

“Well, it’s never really been my cup of tea but I used to know omegas who told me they liked to be restrained while their Alpha mounted them. They said they liked to have something to push or pull against without hurting themselves. And they liked when their Alpha got a little rough and wild, like they couldn’t control themselves because they wanted them so much.”

“But that’s not what you and Jack do?”

“No, Jack likes telling as much as showing. He lets me know how he feels whether we’re in bed or not. But not everyone likes the same thing. Or the same things all the time. And that’s fine. Whoever you’re mated to, you just work out your own way of doings things, your own dance. But whatever you need, a good Alpha will factor that in and give it to you.”

“Oh,” was all Will could think to say as Bella broke into another short coughing fit. When she’d recovered she took his face in both hands and looked at him seriously.

“I need you to promise me something, sweetpea.”

“Yes, of course I will,” he told her.

“No, listen to what it is first,” she insisted. “And if you decide to say yes, I’m going to hold you to it. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Will replied with a sober nod.

“I want you to take care of Jack when I’m gone. He’s going to think he has nothing and nobody left, but I want you to show him that isn’t true.”

He considered protesting that she wasn’t going to die and that it was nonsense to even discuss it but he could sense that wasn’t going to fly. She was brave enough to stare the cold reality in the face and she demanded respect for it.

“Yes, of course I will,” he responded, looking into her eyes which were tearing up suddenly. “You practically raised me.”

He could feel her rush of relief flowing through him as well – more than he would have expected. Why would she think he wouldn't look out for Jack after everything they'd done for him? They were the closest thing to a mother and father he had ever known.

She smiled, pushed the hair out of his forehead and kissed him there. "You've made me so happy, baby."

"Bella," came his choked response but she was already lying back down and coughing again. She was as white as a sheet. Maybe she needed to drink more? Will reached across her to get the glass but she reached up and stroked his cheek again through her coughing fit. Her fingers were like ice.

"You're going... to be... so happy together," she gave a brief beautific smile up at him as his stomach sank with dread and then she leaned over the side of the bed coughing globs of dark blood onto the carpet.

Will froze. He hadn't meant mating. He thought she meant making the Alpha chicken soup and doing his laundry until he was back on his feet again. But how was he supposed to correct the misunderstanding now while she was gasping and choking, leaning half off the bed.

He untangled and handed her the mask to the oxygen tank, pushing her back up to lean on the headboard, but she struggled to breath in – everything seemed to want to pour out of her instead – coughing, tears, a cold sweat.

Just short of panic, Will raced to find Jack at his post but by the time they dashed back into the room she had already left them.

# Lamentation

He was sitting on the floor of the cabin again, his hands pinned behind his back by something he couldn't see. He was sitting next to the blonde-haired boy clutching the grey teddy bear again but they had some kind of blue jacket draped over both of their shoulders.

"I told you you're not allowed in here," the other boy snarled at him as soon as he saw Will. "Get out!"

Will tried to shrink back a little at the venom in his voice but there was nowhere to go. They were being pressed together somehow.

"I'm not doing it on purpose."

"Make it stop!" the other boy was panicking a little now, straining against the cuffs but not getting anywhere.

"I don't know how!"

"Shhh. It will all be okay." Bella was kneeling behind them, a hand on each of their shoulders, her chin resting between then. She didn't sound completely convinced herself though and her hands were shaking a little.

The thumping growling sound started upstairs and a blast of heat hit Will's face from the direction of the stairs. Frantically Will looked around for anything they could use as a weapon but he was pinned to the same spot and everything was too far away. There was a poker heating at the fireplace under what looked like a dark cylinder of meat hanging on a spit over the flames. He could see Jack's Army tattoo on the side of it.

It smelled amazing. His stomach roiled and he would have thrown up except there was no way to move to do it where it wouldn't be all over himself.

He could hear the stomping getting closer to the stairs and gave a helpless little squeal of terror.

"Will," the other boy was saying looking directly at him under his long bangs. "Wake up right now."

He was trying to use his voice but he was too little. Will clamped his eyes shut and shouted at himself to wake up over and over again but it was drowned out by the stomping and hot exhaling. The whole cabin seemed to be shaking.

Then Bella's soft voice cut through everything. "I love you forever, maži meškiukai. You'll always be my babies. Promise me you'll take care of your sister, Hannibal."

The other boy wasn't responding though. He had his hands clamped over both of his ears, the teddy bear pressed in a vice between his stomach and upper thigh as he curled forward into a

ball, his eyes clenched shut so hard tears were streaming down either side.

And then she was being ripped away from them. Will couldn't follow what was happening. The edge of the coat had fallen over most of his field of vision and it seemed to be everywhere and too fast to process – shadows flying in all directions and Bella clutching frantically at their arms until her grip was broken. Being knocked into Hannibal by something enormous passing by him. The air was some hot choking gas that didn't seem to have any oxygen in it. Screaming which just kept ratcheting up to new levels of intensity. Black leathery goat legs with spurs longer than his forearm stomping on the floorboards. The splash of some warm liquid across his face and arms. It seemed to burn into him.

"Will," he heard the other boy hissing frantically. The omega was swamped with terror, guilt and despair and some dark, fathomless rage clawing into him. He opened one eye to see the boy Hannibal looking directly at him, his face drenched in blood.

"Get out!" the Alpha shoved him as hard as he could and Will had the sensation of falling backwards helplessly with no way to break his fall until suddenly he was sitting up in bed again, his arms restrained and the sheets soaked through under him with sweat.

His hands slipped out of the cuffs with hardly any resistance and he rolled over to check the clock. It was barely 2 am but there was no chance he was falling asleep again. Whenever he tried to lie still, he trembled uncontrollably.

He stumbled into the bathroom down the hall to splash some water on his face and then stuck his head out the window chasing a faint breeze.

Across the centre of the compound he could see the warm slightly fuzzy light from Hannibal's bathroom window. Had the same dream woken him up as well? Sometimes Will did have dreams he suspected he'd dug out of the Alpha's "memory palace" somewhere. But never anything like this where Hannibal seemed to know he was in there.

Was he upset? Angry? Sad? Will tried reaching out but couldn't feel him anymore. There was just an echo of loss and the endless hours until he'd have an excuse to see him again.

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Will and Randall dressed the body together since Franklyn and Peter were too squeamish and offered to keep the cubs out of the way instead. She'd picked out the shroud she wanted weeks before – it was silky and pale blue like a bird's egg. Jack had laid it out silently for them on the bed before they got there and then disappeared.

When the four of them lifted her up by straps crossing under her body she was surprisingly light as if even in death she didn't want to be a burden on anyone.

They carried her out to the grave Jack had just dug in a sunny corner of the churchyard. Hannibal was waiting there with a pomegranate sapling she'd asked to be planted over her. He had unusually dark circles under his eyes and avoided looking directly at Will. Hans was clinging to his waist and pretending not to be crying. The rest of the cubs were away with Alana watching them.

The rest of their little group gathered and the four omegas lowered Bella into her grave.

Bedelia gave a short speech about Bella returning the ground she had cherished so much and had spent so many happy hours cultivating. Abigail distributed torch lilies for each of them to drop one-by-one into the grave. Will tried to think of a suitable prayer or statement of gratitude as he dropped his but he was too self-conscious of the long line of people waiting their turn behind him.

Hannibal spoke for a little longer about her grace, charm and exquisite taste, her strength and gentle sense of humour, the long hours she worked without complaint and how they had not yet begun to realise how much she would be missed. “In some ways, she was all of our mothers,” he concluded, tightening his hug slightly around the cub’s shoulder but looking directly at Will for the first time.

The omega felt a chill in his spine but then Bedelia was asking Jack if he wanted to say anything and Will’s heart broke as the Alpha, unable to lift his eyes from the edge of the grave just shook his head no.

Price and Zeller shovelled the earth back over her while Dolores sang “Shelter from the Storm” with her brother accompanying her on guitar. Will felt the sadness of the entire group washing over him along with the music until it was almost unbearable. Tears burned at the back of his eyes but he found he couldn’t shed them even if he’d wanted to.

Hannibal and Randall took their cub back inside when he started to fuss so Will was left to set the sapling in place and straighten it while the last of the grave was filled in around it.

Bedelia tried to put an arm around Jack’s shoulders but he just shook his head, pulled himself away, and stormed back off to the house alone, the air crackling all around him.

Will started to follow him but Jeremiah was in his way again. “We’re sorry about your foster omega,” the young Alpha said awkwardly, his sister nodding beside him.

“We know what it’s like, if you ever want to talk or anything.”

“Thanks,” Will said neutrally, staring at the ground. “That’s very considerate of you. I have to go now though, if you don’t mind.”

They stepped out of his way, Jeremiah scratching behind his ear, and Will sped past and back to the Crawfords’ house.

He crept into the living room feeling like a burglar. Jack was sitting in one of the tan leather armchairs in the darkened room with an unfocused stare at the empty vase over the fireplace.

“What do you want Will?” he mumbled without looking over.

Will cautiously approached the matching chair and lowered himself onto it.

Taking a deep breath for courage, he replied, “I’m going to sit here until you’re ready to talk. You don’t have to say a word until you’re ready but I’m not going anywhere until you do.”

He half expected the Alpha to rant at him and kick him out but Jack just kept staring at the vase and slowly blinking as if all the heart and soul had been sucked out of him. Even when he tried to reach out, all Will could find was a vast blank barrier that stretched as far as he could feel in every direction.

The silence stretched on for ages and Will was starting to wonder if maybe it wouldn't be for the best to break his promise and make Jack something to eat instead. But then the Alpha said, "I'm glad you were with her at the end."

Nobody was with her at the end, Will thought dismally but it didn't seem like the time to argue.

"What did she say?"

Will gulped a little. It was still caught in his throat when he rushed to answer, "How happy you made her. That she didn't want you to... feel alone."

Jack gave a little half smile, staring down at his fingertips. Will saw what Bella meant about the scars. They seemed illuminated now by the oceans of despair they were holding back. Was he supposed to touch him somehow? Would that take some of the pain away? Will's fingers twitched around his kneecap but he couldn't find the confidence to raise his whole hand.

Before Will could decide what to do, the Alpha rose slowly, uncertain on his feet suddenly. "I'll be upstairs if you need anything," he said and then shuffled away.

Will wasn't sure how to respond. He'd promised Bella he'd be there for Jack but the Alpha didn't seem to really want him there. Was he pretending to be strong but really secretly he wanted Will to follow him? Or did he really just need time to himself to process? What was the point of all this empathy that Bedelia kept going on about if it didn't help him understand the most fundamental things about what he was supposed to do?

He walked over to the base of the stairs. A very faint creak of the floorboards told him Jack was in one of the guest bedrooms. He was pacing but that's all Will could hear.

The omega took a few steps up, each one heavier than the last. A few more and he sank down to a seat on the stair tread crushed under some enormous invisible weight he couldn't understand.

He brought his knees up and buried his face in them shaking as he tried to hold the tears back. He'd be no good to anyone if he couldn't hold it all together. Anything other than curling up in a ball felt impossible though.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there before he felt a jacket being draped around his shoulders and a soft hand stroking him behind the ear. He should have been startled – he hadn't heard anyone approaching – but his brain was too busy short circuiting instead.

He gave a little half sob and then Hannibal was lifting him up under his arms. Will wrapped his legs around the Alpha's waist like he had when he was a cub and buried his face in his

chest.

“Shh,” Hannibal said rocking gently from side to side as he took them both down the stairs again, one hand cupping the back of his head. “I know how you feel, Will. We all miss her too. You don’t have to carry it all by yourself.”

Then something burst inside of the omega and all of the pain and misery he’d been piling up for the past few weeks just poured out of him in the most mortifying way possible and all over the front of one of Hannibal’s favourite salmon-coloured dress shirts. He tried to stay as quiet as he could though. The last thing he needed was Jack coming back downstairs and seeing this.

“Shhh. You’re okay, pup,” Hannibal was telling him as he swayed a little and carried him over to the kitchen. “Everything is going to be fine.”

The Alpha set him on the counter next to the platter of food he’d brought over. Will looked down and startled himself with a short semi-hysterical laugh.

“You made tater tots,” he said grinning through the mess that used to be his face and trying to swipe as much away with his wrist and sleeve as he could.

“You know me better than that,” Hannibal said with mock seriousness fishing his pocket square out of the jacket that was still draped around Will’s shoulders and handing it over to assist.

To be fair they were more like mini-potato pancakes, each topped with a little red pepper stuffed with minced duck. But the intention behind this one act shone straight through with perfect clarity to Will who had been blocked ever since he woke up.

He beamed up at the Alpha but then his face sunk again, “Shit, I’m sorry about your shirt.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hannibal told him, stroking under the omega’s jaw. “I’ll just remember to bring my apron next time.”

Will laughed and the Alpha looked up just quickly enough to give him a fond little smile.

“Here try one,” Hannibal said lifting one of the pancakes to mouth level. Will opened up and let him set it on his tongue.

“That’s my good boy,” the Alpha rubbing the lobe of one of his ears between his thumb and forefinger while Will chewed soberly.

# Apparition

With Bella gone and Randall taking watch and scouting shifts a lot more of the responsibility for running the daycare fell on the other omegas. Thankfully Franklyn adored mooning over the cubs, soaking up their rapt attention at his dramatic stories, and Peter was increasingly confident keeping them in order on his own. But with seven of their eleven cubs still in diapers, at least one of them had to man the changing table on a semi-permanent basis while the other two tried to come up with activities.

Since it was almost Halloween, Hannibal suggested they try carving pumpkins today and giving him the discarded guts and seeds to preserve. Or at least the cubs could scribble on the pumpkins and then Will and Jeremiah could carve out the closest approximations consistent with the laws of physics.

Randall and Will were hauling pumpkins into the playroom prior to the cubs' arrival when Peter marched up to them through the lane of the pumpkin patch grinning ear to ear.

He stopped right in front of them and then tilted his neck to one side still smiling inanely at them.

"What am I looking at?" Randall asked when it was obvious that Peter wasn't going to either explain or get out of the way.

Peter pulled one sleeve of his shirt down a little lower so they could just see the side of a fresh bite mark over his collarbone.

"No shit. Is that a mating mark?" Randall asked leaning forward and pulling the corner of his shirt down a little further.

"Who's it from?" Will added setting down his load for the moment. Suddenly his hands felt numb.

"Dr Du Maurier," the other omega crowed. "She said I was finally ready and I can even try having cubs again. I could have one right now!" Peter hugged his belly and swayed back and forth humming.

"How does that even work with a female Alpha?" Randall squinted trying to imagine.

"She sits on top and then she kind of spurts down and she pushes them in with her finger. It's so much better than it was... It doesn't even hurt a bit. It feels amazing! Like a million, million tiny pins on every part of my body at once and then a hundred thousand tons to weight dropping off my back."

"You don't miss, you know," Randall held both hands up measuring an impressive distance apart.

"Nope," Peter said shaking his head back and forth and then grinning again.

“What’s that?” Will asked copying the gesture. “Is that what Hannibal does?”

“Never you mind,” Randall told him sagely picking up the pumpkins again and heading into the house.

Will chased after him but before he could catch up they were back in the playroom and all the cubs were arriving and Franklyn was right there so he had to drop it. For now.

Jonah was recovered enough to hobble short distances with a crutch so his brother and sister helped him upstairs and set him up in a big armchair in the corner of the playroom where he could draw and be part of the action without risking his shoulder or hip getting whacked in the chaos.

He was soft-spoken and very talented at art. The older and quieter cubs gravitated to his side to get ideas for what to do themselves. Jonah drew outlines for some of them and let them fill in the rest. Hans was usually glued to Will unless one of his parents was in the room but today he broke away a little to get help from the other omega. Hans wanted a pumpkin carved with all the members of the family holding hands in a big circle including Bella. He didn’t fully understand the limitations of the pumpkin as media, however.

Will reflected that they should have led with a bit more of a lesson on what Halloween was all about as well. The cubs just drew whatever they liked the most. Will was carving out the mutant bunny rabbits and strawberries Jake drew on his pumpkin when Camille marched over and handed Jeremiah a pumpkin covered in hearts and butterflies.

The Alpha grinned and held it up for Will to admire and then dutifully started work on the design as ordered while the little cub supervised to make sure he stayed in the lines.

He was kind of an arrogant pain in the backside but he was endlessly kind and patient with the cubs. He reminded Will a little of his brother in that they’d both been lumbered with essentially raising much younger siblings from a young age. They had the same kind of gruff up-front attitude but could be twisted around their younger charges’ pinky with the tiniest sniffle or bat of an eyelash.

The Alphas hadn’t committed to immediately trying to rescue Abel Gideon given how outnumbered they were. This hadn’t gone down well with Jeremiah, who threatened to try going back for him alone. Hannibal headed this off at the pass by promising to scout out the Verger compound and see their defences for himself before he agreed to an attempt. The funeral and all the harvest work had delayed things a little though and Jeremiah’s patience was running noticeably thin.

He was on his best behaviour now, however, humming while he worked and gently moving Camille’s finger out of the path of the knife as she tried to show him where it should go next, looking up at Will every few minutes like a pasty Cheshire cat.

When they ran out of pumpkins, Hannibal arranged them artistically around the fountain in his garden and then the cubs were allowed to stay up a little later than usual to see them all lit with candles in them. They ran around in the garden shrieking, hopped up on candied apples,

pumpkin tarts and the grown-ups willingness to twirl around in circles as fast as they could with a cub gripped under each arm.

Their excitement was infectious and Will found himself smiling genuinely for the first time since Bella became seriously ill. He just wished Jack had been willing to come out of the guest bedroom where he'd holed himself up since the funeral.

Seeing the smile as an invitation, Hannibal moved over to offer him some candied pear slices.

"Do you have any plans for your birthday, Will?"

He'd actually forgotten all about it himself but he guessed it was only a week or two away. November 9th. The only time he'd ever really celebrated it was the first year with Hannibal. His sire rarely knew what month it was let alone made the effort to remember specific days and most of the time with Jack and Bella had just been focused on making it through the day alive with enough in their stomach at bedtime to fall asleep.

"Not really," he mumbled into his pear.

"We'll have to have a party then," Hannibal decided. "You only turn 16 once after all."

He remembered the party Hannibal had thrown for his tenth birthday. He made cupcakes with big fluffy brown dog faces and brought them in to the Omega Institute so Will could share them with all his friends. He'd felt shy and awkward explaining that his Alpha made them but all the other omegas told him how lucky he was. It felt like it was a million years ago, not just six.

"I'm not sure it's such a great idea... with everything else going on."

"Nonsense," the Alpha told him. "Everything else has nothing to do with your birthday. I can arrange everything. You only have to turn up and pretend to look surprised."

"Okay," Will replied. "I'll ask Jack."

"You don't need Jack Crawford's permission to come to your own party, Will."

"No, I know. But I don't know if he'll be feeling up to it."

"If he isn't you can come with me. Or with Dr Du Maurier if that makes you feel more comfortable."

"No, that's fine," Will said non-committally relieved to feel Hans tugging at his sleeve and wanting help to relight one of the candles the wind had blown out.

When the cubs started to crash, Will left them for their parents to sort out and went back in the kitchen to pick up the bag of food Hannibal prepared for Jack. Peeking in there was a bowl of turtle soup with instructions on how to reheat it in neat calligraphy on a card attached to the lid with string. Hannibal still refused to use post-it notes on principle even though they'd scavenged boxes full of them. The other bowl had a kale salad with sliced beets and apples. And another square glass container had some of the pumpkin tarts.

Jack wouldn't touch them which meant Will had something to look forward to as a midnight snack. He crossed the courtyard alone under the light of a massive full moon, one of the largest and brightest he could ever remember seeing.

When he got back, he slapped the soup in the microwave for a few minutes and set everything else up on a tray.

It was completely silent upstairs so Will headed for the guest bedroom assuming that Jack would still be in there. He was surprised to find that the Alpha was sitting in a chair in the unlit master bedroom watching the moonlight spill across the unmade bed. There was still an indentation in the middle of it where she had been lying. Will cursed himself for not tidying everything up in the last few days but even he had been avoiding the room as much as possible.

"Jack," he whispered although he wasn't sure why. The room was so still he was hesitant to disturb it.

The Alpha completely ignored him, seemingly in a trance.

Will set the tray down and moved in front of the chair kneeling down a little so that he was at eye level.

It took a few moments but then Jack's eyes finally focused on him. The Alpha gave him a sad smile and then reached out to stroke his hair back.

"Are you OK?" the omega asked. Jack felt resigned but Will couldn't figure out to what exactly.

"I can't be in this house anymore. I can still smell her. In the curtains. In the tiles. The dishes, the chairs. I turn around every five minutes expecting to see her standing right behind me, smiling. I feel like she's there now. Like she could speak to me if she wanted to but she's choosing to be silent."

"I'm sorry, I'll make the bed," Will said raising up a little to start pulling off the sheets but Jack grabbed his wrist lightly and guided him back to his knees.

"What do you want to do?" Will asked feeling a shudder starting in his spine and bracing himself.

"I think we should pack up our things tomorrow morning and go home," Jack said, lightly gripping the back of Will's neck. "I think we need to get some distance from all of this and then one day I might be able to breathe for myself again."

What was he supposed to do? He'd promised Bella – her dying wish. But the thought of living in the RV or in Stammett's rickety cabin again filled him with dread. Was he just being selfish though? He shouldn't be arguing back against the Alpha but he clearly wasn't in his right mind either. All the time he'd spent watching Bedelia work with Peter and Franklyn and scouring over psychiatric journals and books hadn't provided him with any answers either.

“This is my home,” Will told him solemnly. “My whole family is here. And I don’t think you should be by yourself right now either.”

---

“Good evening, Bedelia.” She’d answered the door wearing a flimsy silk camisole covered with a sheer lace dressing gown, clearly on her way to bed.

“Good evening, Hannibal.” Bedelia stepped out of the way, her face studiously neutral on the subject of his intrusion. Hannibal seized the opportunity and strode into her living room.

“Peter told us the good news,” he began, examining the spiky fronds of one of her plants while she refilled her glass of wine and then settled herself in one of the chairs.

“Yes, he’s made remarkable progress, considering where he started. I’m very proud of what we have achieved. But something tells me that’s not why you’re here this evening.”

“No,” he replied. “You’re too perceptive, Doctor”

He settled himself into the chair opposite her, opened his suit jacket and gently smoothed the rest of his clothes.

“It’s about Will. You told me once that you thought he had true empathy. I dismissed your theory which was very rude of me. I wanted to apologise and ask if you if you could recommend something if I wanted to learn more about it.”

“Apology accepted,” she said pouring him a matching glass of wine and offering it up. “And I’m sure I can find some articles that would assist. Was there a particular aspect you were interested in?”

Hannibal sniffed at the edge of the glass and then took a deep draught.

“Yes,” he answered finally. “How to block it. Selectively. I accept that it is a gift, and that it’s an important part of what makes Will, Will.”

“But...”

“But we will be mates soon...”

“If he choses you.”

“He’s going to choose me. I know it.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I see him in my dreams sometimes. He’s in my head. In places where he doesn’t need to be.” Hannibal set the glass down and sat up a little straighter.

“If he’s your mate, he will be offering all of himself up to you. Don’t you think you owe it to him to be completely honest about who you are?”

“He doesn’t need to know what he doesn’t need to know. If I have chosen to leave things in the past, that should be my decision to make. It’s my mind, after all.”

“Well, from the sounds of it, if you do choose to claim him, you’re going to be sharing everything with him, not just your life. It’s not reasonable to expect Will to be less than what he is, just because you’re afraid to deal with your own past.”

“I came here to ask for some literature, Dr Du Maurier, not a therapy session,” Hannibal stood stiffly and walked to the door. He started though as the handle to the sliding door was ripped from his fingertips before he could pull it open and he found himself face to face with Will who looked just as shocked as he felt.

The omega immediately looked down at the ground. “Um, sorry. I was looking for Jack. I mean Dr Du Maurier. For Jack.”

Before either of them could respond, however, an ear piercing wailing broke the night air. It was soon echoed by two more voices.

“That’s Tobey,” Bedelia said looking towards the ceiling.

“Franklyn can settle them,” Hannibal replied curtly and started to step around Will out on to the porch. He stopped though when he noticed that the omega had gone rigid.

“There’s something wrong,” Will said and then dashed for the stairs.

Hannibal could feel the hair standing up on the back of his neck. To him it sounded like babies crying for the sake of crying, but the omega’s intensity piqued his curiosity. He followed Bedelia upstairs and to the door of Franklyn’s room.

The baby lay screeching in the cold night air in his crib beside an open window. The twins wailed mournfully standing against the railing of their crib and reaching to be picked up. Hannibal and Will looked out the window together but the only movement they could see was the rippling of the long white curtains.

# Liberation

I scale the tree in ten long stretches, my claws carving into the bark, the moonlight bathing the hollows in my back. There's a stable branch just level with the plump omega's nursery. He's there now, singing softly to his newborn cub while it suckles.

"The caterpillar sheds his skin to find the butterfly within."

I raise my third immortal eye, resting it on the branch beside me. Capturing his essence and the essence of the cub.

He thinks he's so clever. That he outran the dragon and now he's safe. That the others can protect him.

He'd had an opportunity to witness something truly extraordinary. To be a part of it. But he threw it all away, fleeing with the gimp doctor. He doesn't deserve a second chance. But I'm going to give him one. The dragon is merciful.

I spread myself low across the branch. It dips a little under my awesome weight but holds.

The omega sets the drifting cub down in the crib, covering his modesty even though he thinks he's alone.

"First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is." His voice is stretched and reedy.

Staying low on the branch, bathed in shadows, I let the tips of the leaves scratch at the window sill.

A little wary, the omega comes closer and opens the window to peer outside. When he's tilted to just the right angle, I spring at him, wrenching him free from the nursery, rolling over him, my wings spread wide, both of us plummeting down, my fist at his mouth to stop the screams. The air rushing all around us like blood through the arteries of the universe. Rushing to feed.

This is my design.

---

"Will!" Hannibal shook the little omega gently but he'd gone into some kind of trance staring out the window while Bedelia carried the screaming cubs into another room.

He picked the pup up intending to carry him back to the main house where his brother could watch him but Will twisted out of his grip.

"I can see them," he insisted leaning halfway out the window. "They were flying."

“Will. It isn’t safe here. I want you to come with me right now.” Hannibal used his voice but at a low level so he wouldn’t upset the omega who already seemed half hysterical.

Will ignored him completely, leaning even further out so that the Alpha became alarmed and grabbed the back of his belt.

“They fell in the bushes down there, you can see where they landed.”

Hannibal tightened his grip on the back of Will’s trousers and lifted him bodily back through the window. The omega tried to grip onto the window sill but Hannibal pulled him away too fast.

“Let go of me!”

“I told you it isn’t safe here Will. You need to obey me, now, or you’re going to be punished.”

“It’s not going to be safe until we catch him and we’re never going to do that while you’re wasting time. He’s getting away and we can catch him! Let me down!”

Hannibal blinked and for a flash he saw the cabin, the dragon, Will being ripped away from him dragged upstairs, the red veil falling between them. Cold fury pouring into the hole left behind.

Suddenly he felt disconnected from his arms. He set the omega down on the rocking chair before he dropped him. Will was flushed and sweating but his eyes looked lucid.

“What do you want to do Will?”

“Can we just look at where they landed and see what direction they went?”

It was a side of Will he hadn’t suspected was there. The craving for the hunt. Had it been there the whole time or was he picking it up from Hannibal?

Hannibal looked out the window again. There were no signs of infected. They’d added barricades for several blocks in either direction so the odds were slim that a significant number could sneak up on them.

“Five minutes. Then you need to go find Randall and stay there.”

Will leapt to his feet and was halfway to the door before Hannibal could think of another word.

He met Will down at the front door and helped him shift the large wardrobe blocking it. The omega raced down the steps, making a beeline for the trees lining the road.

“Which tree is it?” Hannibal asked looking up and trying to line up the windows. Bedelia had the lights on in most of the second story now and he couldn’t remember which one was Franklyn’s.

“It’s this one,” Will said pointing to a carving in the trunk – a stylised square with a line through the middle. “What does it mean?”

“In mah jong, it’s the red dragon. The symbol of strength and capricious fortune.” Hannibal traced the symbol with one finger but Will was already looking around for the indentation in the shrubs where they had fallen.

“He thought he could fly,” Will said frowning at the broken branches. “In his mind, he had wings.”

The omega looked around for clues as to which direction they’d gone. “He couldn’t have dragged Franklyn that far without us hearing something. He must have a car. He could be anywhere.”

Hannibal leaned over the shrub and inhaled deeply. There were still some torn bits of cloth and hints of blood (mostly Franklyn’s) in the branches.

“Can you smell something?” Will asked mimicking him. “I can’t smell anything.”

“Yes, it’s the same odour from the alley the last time.”

Suddenly Will grabbed both sides of the Alpha’s head, pressed their foreheads and noses together and took in a deep breath. Hannibal was too startled to react before Will pulled away again as if nothing had happened.

“It smells like popcorn,” he said sniffing in a few other directions to see if it was anywhere else. “Can you tell which way they went?”

Hannibal tried as well, but came up with nothing. Will was right. He would have had a car waiting down here somewhere knowing he was outnumbered. And who knew how long it had taken the cubs to start crying. The dragon could have a sizable head start.

The Alpha ground his teeth in frustration. It’s not that Franklyn was an essential asset. But he was part of Hannibal’s pack and he had been taken straight out of their home without warning. It could as easily have been Will or Alana or one of the cubs he had picked off from the group. For that, he needed to be put down. Shown his place in the universe. The great red dragon indeed. At best he was a shaggy hyena slunk back to his pit.

Will looked up at the branches and then closed his eyes again. “He was filming them. That’s part of it for him. He captures them so he can watch them even long after they’re gone. He’ll have a lair... somewhere private he can properly enjoy what he creates. Like a movie theatre. That’s why he smells like bad popcorn oil! Where’s the nearest one?”

“What a cunning boy you are, Will” Hannibal couldn’t help saying, cupping his ear, and Will beamed at him in the moonlight, his face incandescent with happiness.

“Come on.”

“Will...”

“We can still catch him.”

“Will...” Hannibal felt his heart wrench watching the pup’s face fall. “That’s five minutes. You promised you’d go stay with Randall. I can take care of it from here.”

“But I want to help. Can’t I? Just one time?”

Hannibal wrapped the omega up in his arms as he led him back to Bedelia’s front door. He wanted to say no. Every instinct in his body was screaming at him to drag Will back down into the basement where he knew he’d be safe and lock him up in there for good. He’ll get in the way. He’ll get hurt. He’ll see. Really see.

It’s one thing to serve him heart tartare from fine china at the dining table. It’s another thing to harvest the still beating heart in front of him.

There were a million good reasons to say no and only one to say yes. He’ll never smile at me again the way he just did if I make him go back.

“Okay, you can drive,” Hannibal told him. “But you’re staying in the car.”

---

I stalk into the science centre through the security entrance. The scent of blood and rancid oil has been vivid in my nostrils since the parking lot. He hasn’t bothered to lock the door. It would never occur to him that a mere mortal could track him to his lair.

There doesn’t seem to be any electricity but the moonlight streaming through the floor to ceiling windows creates both shafts of lights across the room and deep shadows to conceal myself in. The first chamber is a physics exhibition dotted with machines to demonstrate the laws of motion and energy. But everything is still tonight.

There are signs for the IMAX theatre to the left but Franklyn pissed himself halfway through the exhibition room and it’s obvious from the smell he was dragged in the other direction.

Following the odour into the main lobby, I can practically see the trail of their scent up the stairs. There are smears of fresh blood on the light blue carpet. I take a brief detour into the dinosaur exhibit and grab the fire axe from the emergency alcove. I use it to smash away part of a cave bear’s jaw creating a weapon for my other hand. I could have brought a gun but it’s been far too long since I had the pleasure of feeling life ebbing away under my own grip. How many more chances will I ever have?

Taking a moment to admire the towering machines of death surrounding me, I imagine bringing the cubs back here after the building is clear. It wouldn’t be hard to rig the centre back up with electricity. They would love it, especially Randall.

The dragon will have heard me coming but he hasn’t revealed himself. I stride up the stairs taking them two at a time. Through the three storey windows I can see far out over the stillness of the harbour unbroken by a single ship, the light sparkling on distant midnight waves.

The trail leads into the human body exhibit. In the moonlight, I can see Franklyn's broken corpse laid out on a giant bed of nails in the centre of the room. He's been dead for only a few minutes but the dragon had time to savage him, ripping away chunks of flesh, ragged bits of cloth snarling everywhere.

The dragon fled into the bowels when he heard me coming. I can almost hear his harsh and ragged breath echoing as he watches me.

"There's no need to be shy," I tell him stepping into the giant model. The walls are pale purple and lumpy bouncing some of my own voice back at me. "Why don't you come out and show me your magnificence?"

"You dare," he huffs. "You dare!"

The bowels wind and turn but have only one track leading me straight to him. I catch up to the dragon near the exit but he then turns to face me before I can tackle him to the ground. He's huge, a full foot taller than me, and well-built. I've taken down bigger in my day though.

He puffs up and snarls. He's done something to sharpen his teeth and he's wearing leather gloves with claws set into them.

We lunge at the same time. I'm just able to avoid being tackled to the ground but my axe goes wild and lodges firmly in the fibreglass walls. As I try to yank it out again, he gets back to his feet and charges me again.

I abandon the axe and duck back out into the larger room. We're surrounded by skinned human figures doing various activities showing the musculature. I dive over two figures ice-skating and he crashes into them knocking the exhibit over. I aim to cave his head in with my piece of jaw but he rolls away too quickly, using his claws to perforate my thigh as I try to stumble to my feet again.

Ignoring the searing pain, I tackle him to the ground and get my hands around his throat while he bashes me in the sides and then slips out of my grasp.

We stumble to our feet a third time and then he slams me back through a glass exhibition case. Now I'm starting to feel my age a little. He's even heavier than he looks and he's in practice. Death is not a neglected hobby for him. He's starving.

I remember now what it is to be starving. To be holding on to life by a thread so thin you can't imagine what it could be made of or how it could bear your weight. To see your sole path out climbing down a rope of entrails.

He comes around to kick me in the head and the ribs again but I grab my shard of jaw bone and lodge it deep in his inner thigh. The hot spray of arterial blood coats my hand. As he staggers back, I lunge for his throat.

This is my design.

---

Will was determined to sit patiently in the car but he couldn't feel Hannibal anymore and it terrified him. He had blinked for a second and suddenly the connection was lost. He couldn't seem to get it back again.

He didn't want to give the Alpha any excuse to refuse to bring him outside ever again but it had been ages and why wasn't he back yet? Will was shaking and he had no outlet. They'd been here what must have been an hour and he hadn't seen a single infected – just eerie green fireflies shooting around under the trees all around him.

Unable to bear it any longer, Will grabbed the shotgun and a katana and started jogging into the center, He was about to head for the foyer when he heard whimpering to his left. He followed the signs for the IMAX theater and was almost overcome by the smell of rotting flesh. At the door he found a pile of half eaten carcasses – mostly animals but he couldn't be sure what they all were.

Two of them moved a little and whimpered. They were dogs, or at least they had been at one point. They were so emaciated and weak it was difficult to distinguish them from all the litter they were half buried in. Their collars were tied to something in the pile of rubbish but Will couldn't see what.

"Hi doggies," he whispered holding out a biscuit for the closer one. He was some kind of retriever mutt, brown with black flecks. The other one was whiter with brown flecks.

The brown one crawled a little forward on his belly, gumming up the biscuit with a little huff and letting Will scratch between his ears. He produced a second biscuit for the other dog and she also crawled forward to take it.

Stay focused Will, he told himself. If Hannibal doesn't already kick your ass for leaving the car, he's going to kill you for chasing after strays when you're supposed to be looking for him. He'll just find the Alpha and then they'll casually run into the dogs again on the way out. Hannibal would have to let him keep them then.

He emptied out his pockets of the last half-dozen dog biscuits in the meantime and split them between the mutts. He was just turning to stand up again when he saw a little girl, about Hansel's size, pointing a gun directly at him. She had dark skin and wide grey eyes, great masses of black hair framing her face like a halo.

"Hi there," Will said holding his open palms up at her. "Are these your pets? What are their names?"

"Not pets. For dinner." She told him. As she moved into the light a little more he could see she had a cleft palette which gave her a lisp. "Dinner" came out as "thinner".

"I'm not here to hurt anyone," Will told her sensing her anxiety. She was a hundred times more afraid of him than he was of her. "I'm just looking for my friend. A tall man, blonde hair, wearing a suit. Have you seen him?"

She shook her head no. Will went to stand back on his feet and she gave a little shriek and pulled the trigger. There was only a clicking sound. Then she bolted into the theater.

Will followed but it was pitch black inside. The only way to try to navigate was the faint light under the doors and by feeling out the stairs, the railings and the backs of the seats.

It smelled terrible. Like death had soaked deep into every cushion. Will was afraid to touch anything.

“It’s OK,” he said quietly and calmly. He could feel heartbeats all around him but couldn’t pinpoint them. “I just want to talk. Can we go back out where it’s light?”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll run before he gets back.” It was a soft, feminine voice. An omega. But ragged and sore, as if she’d only just recovered it.

“Are you hurt?” Will asked. “We have a car. I can get you guys out of here. You don’t have to be afraid.”

He heard a little squeal that sounded like an infant.

“Please,” the omega was pleading with him. “Please go. He’s going to kill you, He’s insane.”

They’ll run if they think they won’t get caught.

“You don’t have to worry about him anymore,” Will told them risking a normal tone to sound more confident. “My Alpha took care of him. I can take you somewhere safe now. You just have to trust me.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not. He’s a tall Alpha, black hair, big horn tattoo on his back, thinks he’s a dragon.”

There was a long pause and Will swore he felt the ghost of something sweeping past his leg. He started to back up slowly towards the exit.

Finally, he heard the soft voice say “come here babies” and a general shuffle towards the exit. He hurried back himself and held the door open for them.

There were two little girls, about 5 and 4, on either side of the omega guiding her by pulling the bottom corners of her jacket. She stared ahead blankly but seemed to sense where he was giving a soft nod in his direction. Her eyes were covered by thick white cataracts. She was massively pregnant and had one-year-old twins balanced on each hip.

“Well,” she said when they were all clear of the doors and Will had closed them behind her. “Rescue us already.”

“Right,” he said with a swallow. He cut the dogs free and tried to pull them along by what was left of their leashes but they were too weak to walk so he ended up carrying them back out to the entrance. He set the dogs down carefully and told the omega and her cubs to wait.

They didn't want to do it, shifting around nervously, but he swore it would only take a second.

He dashed back to the parking lot and then drove the car up as close to the doors as he could bring it. They'd taken one of the electric cars because it was quieter but there was barely room to cram the omega, her four cubs and the two dogs in the back seat and leave room for himself and Hannibal in the front.

"Just wait here a minute," he said when they were all loaded in.

"Don't you dare leave us here alone," the blind omega was saying as he pushed the door shut and then raced back into the center to find the Alpha.

He sprinted across the foyer and up the stairs holding the shotgun up in a way that made it difficult for him to maintain his balance. It looked a lot easier in the movies.

He found Hannibal sitting on the ground with his legs splayed out leaning back against a giant model of a heart. The Alpha was drenched in blood and unconscious.

For a second, Will was sure he was dead. A glance told him the dragon certainly was – his chest split open and pieces of him spread across the floor.

Then Hannibal's hand gave the slightest little flop and suddenly Will remembered how to breathe again.

He slid down on his knees until he was at the Alpha's side and took his hand feeling for a pulse (not that he would know what to do with one if he found it – why had he spent all his free time reading Bedelia's psychiatric journals instead of learning something practical?)

Hannibal's eyes cracked open a little and then gave him a familiar half smirk.

"Hello Will," he said trying to raise an arm to stroke his cheek but it only made it to his knee. "You're so beautiful like this. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Are you dying?"

"No, pup. But it's been a while since I performed surgery on myself. I've got the artery tied now. I was just having a little rest."

"Can I move you?"

"We can try."

Will tried to pull them both to their feet under Hannibal's arm but the Alpha was too heavy and he slipped in the pool of blood on the floor crashing on his backside. Hannibal winced and gave a slight hiss of pain.

"You get up first and then give me a hand," Hannibal suggested.

Will dragged himself back up onto his feet and then used both hands to pull one of Hannibal's arms up while the Alpha dragged himself up the side of the model with the other clutching on to different levels of arteries and veins for balance.

There were huge shards of glass sticking out of one side of his shoulder perilously close to his neck.

"Should we take those out?" Will asked.

"No, I've got the easy ones. We can leave the rest for Alana."

"She's going to be furious you ran off here on your own."

"I'm not on my own," the Alpha said smiling at him again and dropping his head against the side of Will's.

Hannibal couldn't put any weight on one of his legs so he leaned what felt like his whole body onto Will. It took ages to get down the stairs because the Alpha was basically hopping and trusting Will to rebalance him on each step. The omega had tears of exhaustion streaming down his face by the bottom. Hannibal had gone quiet and white as a sheet. He had to half-drag him across the foyer and back through the physics exhibit.

He balanced Hannibal against the side of the car trying to avoid the glass shards and then quickly pulled the door open, guided the semi-conscious Alpha into the front seat, slammed the door closed and ran around to the other side. He could hear infected but couldn't see them. Once they were in the car they should be safe enough.

Will jumped into the driver's side, ignoring the indignant complaints from the other omega and her older cubs. He floored it for home with his car full of strays.

# Determination

The bed Will woke up in was unfamiliar but the sensation unfortunately was. Soaked in sweat, his heart racing, his arms weak from straining against the cuffs, his jaw sore from grinding his teeth. He hadn't been able to remember any of his dreams since they came back from the dragon's lair – just that they left him wiped out and hollow.

It took him a few moments to remember they moved last week into Jack's original house on the north side of the block. Alana had been living there before she decided to shift next door to Hannibal and her taste was everywhere including the bright red giraffe print throw Will wrapped himself in as he stumbled to the bathroom to splash water on his face.

Jack was in the hall, full of rise and shining forced good spirits for the benefit of Reba's older cubs whom he was trying to corral into the dining room so she could get an extra hour of sleep.

"You look terrible, pup" Jack told him reaching out to feel his forehead. "Are you coming down with something?"

He did still feel a little hot and dizzy. He was having a hard time shaking off the fog this morning.

"I'm making breakfast. My famous pancakes. Why don't you go lie down and I'll bring some up for you too?"

Will didn't have the strength to argue. He didn't want to lie down again on the wet sheets so he curled up in the overstuffed armchair in his bedroom and dozed again feeling slightly guilty at leaving Jack to manage everything on his own.

Bedelia and Hannibal had both offered to take Reba and her four cubs for their quarantine period, not wanting to overload Jack who was still grieving. But he'd insisted that he needed something else to do with himself besides moping around the house and talking Reba through how to navigate in a new environment seemed to be just the project. Her cubs stuck to her like glue for the first week, especially the three younger ones who were all omegas. Now the older two, the Alpha girl who had held a gun on him and whose name was Catherine (*not* Cathy or Caty, thank you very much) and her four-year-old sister Marian, were willing to spend ten or fifteen minutes with Jack or Will if they knew their mother and the twins (Blake and Rosalie) were just upstairs.

Will was more than a little annoyed when he saw it was Bedelia bringing him the pancakes and not Jack. Why couldn't everyone just mind their own business and leave him in peace?

"Good morning, Will," she said setting the tray on the side table next to him. "Jack said you weren't feeling very well and unfortunately it was me or Dr Chilton."

Will shivered. Alana went into labour with her new son, Julian, just after she finished stitching up Hannibal. Since the Alpha doctor was unconscious from the blood loss for

several days, Dr Chilton had been called in for the delivery. Alana still got a thousand-mile stare whenever it was mentioned.

“I’m fine,” Will insisted, sitting up and sniffing at the pancakes. He’d been nauseous when he first woke up but suddenly he was ravenous. He looked around for the fork and then Bedelia held it out for him.

“Thank you,” he said around a mouthful of pancake a moment later.

Bedelia reached out to feel his forehead. He tried to dodge away and fend her off with the fork but she trapped him against the chair cushion.

“You don’t have a fever now. Jack said you’ve been having night sweats though and that you’re skipping half your meals and gorging at the others...”

“Good of him to notice...”

“That you’re unusually irritable...”

Will snorted.

“How much slick are you producing?”

Will dropped his fork on the plate with a clatter. “Oh my god, will you please stop?”

“I know it makes you uncomfortable Will but it is something that we need to discuss. Your 16th birthday is tomorrow. These are all symptoms of pre-heat as I suspect you’re well aware. I know Hannibal told you you could have a choice with whom you mate. If you’re not ready to make that choice in the next day or two then we need to start you on heat suppressants. I have a supply. They’re expired but that should just reduce the effectiveness a bit. We could compensate by adjusting the dosage with some experimentation. If you want to go that route though you should be confined for a trial period with one of the betas supervising you as there is still a risk that you could still go into heat. We’d need to think about the logistics of that carefully given the current circumstances.”

Will glared at the carpet, his appetite gone.

“I’m sorry you don’t have Bella here to talk you through all of this. I’m afraid I’m a poor substitute. But if you have any questions at all, I hope you know I’m here to help you. We all are. Why don’t you just have a think about it for today and we can pick up this conversation again tomorrow morning?”

Bedelia gave his knee a squeeze and then a moment later she was gone.

He’d eaten less than half his plate but it was everything he could do to keep that down now. More for Winston then, he thought, as he changed into fresh clothes, smoothed down the worst of the rat’s nest on top of his head, grabbed what was left of his breakfast and headed back over to their former house where the dogs were still staying for now. Jack didn’t want them all underfoot while Reba was still trying to get her bearings.

The dogs had the run of the central alley and any of the gardens and houses where they weren't trying to grow anything that could get trampled or dug up. But mostly they crashed on the porch of Will's old house and that's where he found them all now waiting expectantly for their breakfast.

He scooped out cans into the eight bowls on the dining room table, breaking up the pancakes so they each got a piece (set at a jaunty angle on top – presentation was everything as Hannibal always said.) Then he brought them out and set them on the porch, the dogs crowding into his legs to get at them.

He sat on the swing and watched them a little enviously. They didn't agonise over who to love and share their life with. It just bubbled straight out of them. Hansel helped him wash and feed the two new additions that first morning back. Will asked him what they should call the white one with brown flecks and he'd said "Applesauce", his favorite food that week. She'd dropped her head on his shoulder and just like that he was her boy.

Winston was the same with Will. A bath, a brush, some flea medicine, a few cans of chopped liver and it's eternal love. He would mope outside the new house now giving pathetic little heartbroken yowls whenever Jack kicked him out of it.

Will didn't want to be locked by himself in one of the other houses for months while Dr Bloom or Dr Chilton tested his slick every few days and adjusted his suppressant dosage. And the side effects were supposed to be awful, assuming they worked at all. What was that going to buy him anyway? A year or two before he had to make the same decision anyway? Was there any information he was going to have then that he didn't have right now?

"Right," he told Winston who was looking at him curiously. "Just pick one and be done with it."

He lined up five biscuits on the arm of the chair. "Bedelia, Dolores, Jeremiah, Jack, Hannibal."

He picked up the first one. Bedelia. She was always on his side. She saw great things in him and encouraged him to develop himself. She didn't place demands on him, just let him get there on his own. But her interest was clinical. He was a science experiment for her. Was she still going to be interested in twenty years when she already knew everything about him there was to know?

He tossed the biscuit to Winston and then picked up the next two. The Gideons. Jeremiah had made it pretty obvious he was keen. And he was moderately hot in a "prep school kid who sells weed and fake IDs" kind of way. They still wanted to run away and play cowboys in Montana. He was only a year or so older than Will. He was malleable in a way the older Alphas weren't. They could redefine everything some place with no rules holding them back.

It sounded pretty lonely though, just the four of them scrounging out in the wilderness. He'd miss everything with his little nieces and nephews. He'd probably never see his brother again. Did they have books in Montana? Maybe. But it would be life in the RV all over again without Bella and the odd scraps of news from Price and Zeller to make it tolerable. And for

the same reason, he was never going to swear off Alphas and go live on his own or try to peel Randall away to come live with him.

With a sigh, Will threw the two biscuits to Max and Buster and then picked up the last two.

Jack. He was a handsome decent hard-working Alpha who would do anything to take good care of his omega. His relationship with Bella was exactly what Will wanted. She had total freedom within her domain, respect, devotion. He had sworn to Bella on her death bed that he wouldn't abandon Jack.

He was never going to be anything to Jack though except for "not quite Bella". She would haunt every look and every interaction. Even if it was a benevolent haunting, it would never be just the two of them making their own life together. The other Alphas had other omegas and betas, but the secret not so noble part of Will was pretty confident he could compete on equal terms with them. He was never going to be a match for Bella's ghost.

So Hannibal. I love him and he loves me. Back when I was dreaming, I would dream about him almost every night. When we were hunting together, it felt so amazing. Like all the pieces of the universe clicking together. Every second we're not together feels like a wasted opportunity.

In his mind, he's taking care of me. He just doesn't know how to do it. He's read the manual and decided he knows what he's doing. He makes me feel like a useless cub who's just along for the ride. He doesn't respect my opinion about things. He just makes decisions and expects me to be on board with them. He doesn't let me in, or at least not on purpose. He gets angry at me for trying to understand him.

He's even older than Jack. Can he change? I want him, but I want to be free, and to have respect, and to be with someone who will help me be the best version of myself.

Will shoved the last two biscuits back in his pockets. He needed more information.

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Hans intercepted him at the door, throwing his arms around Will's waist and planting them to the spot.

"Hi Uncle Will. I love you so much."

"Uh... hi kiddo. Does your Papa know you're out here eating frosting for breakfast?"

"What? No! Nothing!" The cub hastily swiped the tell-tale lavender buttercream off his nose and upper lip with both hands.

Right. Nothing suspicious happening here. Will tried to push on a little further so he could see into the kitchen but Hans howled for him to stop. "Wait! No. You can't go in there. Daddy needs something in the garage!"

Will could swear he heard muffled laughter and the fridge door closing. Clearly it was a conspiracy.

“What does your Daddy need in the garage?”

“Something! Come on!” Hans said urgently, grabbing three of his fingers and pulling him back out the door.

Will played along, allowing the cub to drag him down the path to the garage and acting as surprised as Hans did that Randall wasn’t there. On the way across the garden, he picked up a rubber dog toy shaped like a squirrel and squeezed it a few times. Moments later Buster, Winston, Max and Applesauce came bounding into the yard.

“Hi doggies!” Hans squealed as soon as he saw them. It was good to know that even if he looked like a purebred Lecter, there was still some Graham DNA in there somewhere.

Will handed him the toy squirrel suggesting he play fetch with them and then immediately bolted back for the kitchen door as soon as the cub was distracted.

He made it just in time to see Hannibal closing the fridge door, the counters suspiciously bare, something in the ovens.

“Good morning, Will.”

“Good morning,” he replied crossing over to get a better look in the oven window before Hannibal stiffly moved to block him.

“I can see I need to choose my assistants with more care in the future.”

“What are you making? It smells good.”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself about. Was there something you wanted Will?”

“Yes, actually. If you have a minute.”

“For you, I have 43,” Hannibal replied checking the oven timer. “Why don’t we talk in my study?”

The Alpha was still limping and leaned on Will a little as they crossed into the other room and settled into their usual chairs.

Now that they were actually here, Will felt a little dizzy again but Hannibal waited patiently for him to begin.

“You said I could have a choice. About who I mate with.”

“I did,” the Alpha said simply with the very faintest ghost of a smile. “Have you made a decision?”

“No,” Will fidgeted beginning to regret coming in here at all. “I mean, I have front runners. But I have conditions and I wanted to discuss them.”

“Would it be presumptuous to assume that I’m one of the front runners?”

“Yes. No. You are.”

“What are the conditions then?”

“Three things.” Will paused for a second and licked his lips but Hannibal made no move to interrupt him.

“I want to be on the Alpha Council. I mean, it should just be a Council Council. And if Alana gets to sit on it for the betas then I should get to sit on it for the omegas. And vote. The same as everyone else.”

“I’d have to discuss it with the others. It’s not just up to me. But if they agree and if the omegas agree you should represent them then I would support you joining. You’ve proven that you have a unique and valuable insight from which we can all benefit.”

Will let out a short sigh of relief. That was deceptively easy. The rest was a lot harder though.

“What’s the second condition?”

The omega cleared his throat, forced himself to make eye contact and then dove in.

“I want to go wherever I want, whenever I want. I don’t want to be ordered around all the time and told I can’t do things. I’m not a slave or a pet. I’d be your mate. Like Bella with Jack. And if I really wanted to do something, you wouldn’t stop me.”

The Alpha was quiet and stared at the end of his armrest for so long, Will was sure he was going to say no. He was negotiating for the whole rest of his life though so how could he possibly backtrack it now even if he wanted to?

“Why do you want to be my mate, Will?” The Alpha sounded a little sad and far away and still wouldn’t look up at him.

Shit, he’s definitely going to say no. Will was surprised at how desperately he was searching for an answer where the endgame wasn’t “no”. Finally, he said the only thing he could. “My inner voice sounds like you. I can’t get you out of my head.”

Hannibal gave him a wistful smile. “I feel the same way. Sometimes I can see you in my memory palace, in places I know you’ve never been. But it feels now like you’ve been in there the whole time.”

Will sat up and leaned forward now. “Me too. I have dreams and I know they’re not my memories but they feel so real. The forest. And the cabin.”

Will shivered a little with dread and grief.

“Yes,” Hannibal replied, looking up again a little after gathering his thoughts. “When I was very young, everything I cared about was ripped away from me. It makes it... difficult for me, when I do get something that I value very much, not to bind it to myself as tightly as I can. To look after and preserve it. That’s a part of who I am. The last thing I want is to hold you or your brother back and have you resent me for it, but if what you’re asking for is total freedom

to do whatever you want, whenever you want, then I feel like you're asking me not to be myself, not to be an Alpha anymore. I don't know if that's something I can actually promise you."

"I wouldn't. I mean, I'd still ask your opinion about everything and respect it. I just don't want to feel like I can never do any of the things I love because you'll say 'no, it's too dangerous' automatically. I loved hunting with you. I know it's not totally safe and you didn't really want me to, but I felt like that's the most real thing we ever did together and I don't want to have to give those kinds of thing up."

The Alpha was completely still again for a long time. Will could feel the anxiety pouring off him and was desperate to give him a hug and say it was all OK, he loved him just the way he was, but that wouldn't have been completely honest and he had to give Hannibal time to work through the problem in his own way.

"Potentially we can compromise," Hannibal said finally. "You wouldn't have to obey me all the time, but... I would get some times when you would agree to submit for me. To do whatever I want without question. I think if I can have that a few times a week, then I can let go some of the rest of the time for the things you really want to do."

Will blushed and squirmed a little in his seat. Actually that sounded pretty hot.

"I'll give you a safe word if you really don't want to do something, but I need to know... it makes me settled to know that you'll be mine absolutely when I need you to be. And I think it would be good for you too, Will. Nobody is really happy when they are 100% free, believe me. It means you don't care about anyone and nobody cares about you. This way we both get what we need at least part of the time."

"OK," Will said his imagination racing so fast he almost forgot it was a compromise at all.

"What's the last condition?"

"I don't know if it's even a condition really, but I'm not sure I'm ready to have a million cubs straight away. I do want to eventually... I just don't know if I'd be really good at it."

Hannibal leaned forward a bit more now, looking concerned and addressing him sincerely.

"Of course you will be. You're fantastic with Hans and all the others. Randall was the same way in the beginning. You just didn't have a great example to draw on in your own sire. It takes a bit of practice to build up your confidence but I can see your heart and our cubs would see it too. And you have the whole group here to help you or when you need a break."

Will shifted a little in his seat, not quite ready to agree.

"It wouldn't be a dealbreaker for me, Will, if you decided you really didn't want to be bred. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't want as many cubs as you can carry for me. I want to be able to see a piece of myself growing inside of you always." Hannibal leaned forward, kneeling on the floor and kissing his hand.

“But what if they end up like me?”

“I can’t think of anything that would make me happier.” The Alpha leaned in and kissed him gently on the lips for the briefest moment and Will felt all the skin on his body tighten and every hair stand on end.

“Anyway, we don’t have to decide everything today. I’m not going to wear protection when I claim you because it interferes with the bonding process. If you don’t quicken in your first heat, we can discuss putting you on birth control until you feel like you’re really ready.”

Hannibal stood and settled himself back in his chair with his legs crossed and his arms folded over his lap.

“You just think I’m going to quicken in my first heat.”

“The odd are very much against it. I’d have to be a very potent Alpha.”

Will couldn’t help laughing and suddenly it felt like all the tensions that had been building in him for months dropped away.

“I do like a challenge though. So what’s to be your decision?”

Will stood up and crossed the room, climbing into Hannibal’s chair with his legs straddling the Alpha’s.

“I choose you,” he said looking deep into the Alpha’s bemused eyes and seeing the same bone-deep affection that was consuming him reflected back. Before Hannibal could reply, he locked lips with him, not really sure what he was doing, speaking wordlessly into his beloved’s mouth.

Hannibal reached up to cradle the back of his head, deepening the connection, gently beginning to sink into his mouth, transferring something soft and warm and foreign along his tongue. Beneath the expensive aftershave, Will could begin to smell the unmistakable musk of the Alpha, his Alpha’s, arousal.

He wriggled down a little at their middles and then he could feel it as well, insistent against his inner thigh, radiating its own secret heat like a hooded lantern.

Hannibal’s other hand which had been gently rubbing circles at his lower back plunged a little into the waist of his pants, one finger probing gently a little further than the others. They starting to grip and knead at Will’s buttock in time with their breaths - pulling the omega closer and closer into him.

And then the Alpha was breaking away. Will wanted to scream in frustration but Hannibal stroked his cheek with one finger instead and then helped him back onto unsteady feet.

“I know, pup,” the Alpha said wincing from his own situation and not in a hurry to stand. “You’re not in heat yet though and the bonding won’t take properly until you are. And there’s arrangements to make. I need to talk to the others. We need to set you up someplace comfy to nest.”

Before Will could answer, the timer on the oven started chiming.

“I can get that,” Will said leaping away a little. Hannibal kept a grasp on one of his hands though and used it to pull himself to his feet and to curl Will into him. He lightly kissed the back of his neck and then where the mating mark would go.

Will’s whole body hummed.

Hannibal stepped back a little, still holding his hand and gave him a wide smile and a sharp slap on the rear. “Go find something to do that isn’t snooping.”

# Consummation

“Surprise!”

They were all gathered in the playroom which Peter had lured him into under false pretences – pretending one of the dogs was choking.

They stood around clapping while Will raced to catch his breath and still his heart from pounding. He was going to smack the everliving shit out of Peter the first chance he got.

“Thank you...” he said when he found his voice again. “Please stop that.”

They all laughed and broke up into groups. Bedelia put some swing records on and danced with Zeller, Price and even Chilton. Abigail and Alana were sitting together cooing over their new cubs while trying to keep the older ones from causing permanent damage to each other. Jack was talking to Reba – reassuring her that her cubs hadn’t gotten lost in the anarchy. Randall was talking Hans down from the ledge over the fact that his little noise making gadget hadn’t worked right when Will first came in.

Will found himself alone in the middle of his own party for a second until Hannibal came over to rescue him. He led him over to the center table where there was a three-layer cake frosted in a checked black and red pattern covered in vining light purple roses and maraschino cherries. How the Alpha had found time to decorate it was a mystery to Will, who’d been unable to concentrate on anything except fighting down his boner for the past twenty-eight consecutive hours.

He was grateful that they’d gone to all the effort for him. He was just finding other human beings massively inconvenient at the moment.

Apart from that though, Will felt happier than he could ever remember being – like suddenly he was on a planet where the gravity was half what it used to be. Hannibal kept finding excuses to touch him, fixing the way his vest fell, brushing his finger when he refilled his drink, or gently moving him to one side or the other to avoid a careening cub.

Every second was charged but had also slowed, widening into what seemed like an endless gulf between now and when can we finally be alone together again?

Hannibal lit all the candles and then Hansel helped Will blow them out while everyone smiled and clapped and sang for him. Tickling the cub’s sides and watching him erupt in giggles, Will couldn’t help reflecting that this time next year he could have his own little bundle, just as amazing as this one but completely his own. For all his misgivings, that felt like an amazing possibility in a whole constellation of previously unimagined amazing possibilities.

They carved up the cake and distributed it to everyone together. Somehow Will had never tried red velvet cake before, but now it was his absolute favorite.

He felt massively self-conscious having to open all his presents in front of everyone, but Bedelia kept the music on, Hannibal kept the food and drinks circulating, and none of the cubs had the patience to watch the whole thing anyway so the audience at any given moment was pretty freeform.

He did get some pretty great gifts though and didn't even have to fake enjoy them. His nephew gave him a drawing showing all of his dogs sitting in rocket ships. Peter gave him a pet rat called Kevin but then promised to take care of it for him (and keep it out of the house after seeing the expression on Hannibal's face). Bedelia gave him a series of detective novels.

But he had to say the best gift came from Jack who gave him fly tying gear saying it was from both him and Bella. He'd almost forgotten how much he missed fishing until he saw it. Hannibal looked a bit annoyed to be upstaged but he didn't absolutely say Will couldn't go fishing later either, especially when Abigail said she wanted to learn too. Five years of canned tuna was probably weighing in Will's favour as well.

When he was through with the whole pile of wrapped gifts on the table and the cake was more or less demolished and the cubs were running out of steam and peeling off for their naps, he still hadn't gotten anything from Alana, Abigail, Randall or Hannibal. Abigail stepped forward with her folded up scarf wanting to tie it around his eyes.

He wasn't keen, but played along trusting they wouldn't get up to too much. As soon as he couldn't see anything, he felt Hannibal lifting him out of his chair and then spinning them both around until he lost track of which direction they were facing while everyone else laughed and clapped along to the music.

Then they were heading off somewhere. They were still inside and were going up stairs but other than that, Will didn't have a clue. It was more exhilarating than scary or disorientating though and if he did start to feel a little wobbly, the Alpha's scent was right there.

Finally, Hannibal set him down standing on what felt like carpet. It was much quieter here wherever they were. He couldn't even hear the shouting of the cubs or the music anymore.

"Go on, take it off," Randall told him.

Will pushed the scarf up onto his forehead and stood amazed. He was in a room he'd never seen before, painted his favourite shade of light green. The wall across from the entrance had a big fieldstone fireplace and almost every surface that didn't have a window was covered in half empty bookshelves.

There was a king-sized bed on one side of the room covered in a homey leaf-patterned quilt, some comfy looking rocking and armchairs and dog beds scattered around on a thick central rug.

"Where are we?" Will asked trying to glimpse out the window. They were up pretty high, close to the neighbour's roofline.

"It's your room," Randall told him. "If you want."

“We cleared out part of the attic for you,” Hannibal explained.

“Do you like it?” Abigail added.

“It’s perfect,” Will said getting a little choked up and overwhelmed from the long morning. “How did you find time to do all of this?”

“Randall picked everything out and put up the shelves and rigged all the lighting. Hannibal did the painting and found the rug. Alana made the quilt and picked out all the books and I set up the office next door. Do you want to see it?” Abigail was half dragging him along as she spoke.

They went out into a landing area. Will recognised the stairs now which must lead down to the second floor around the door to the nursery. He’d seen the outline in the ceiling before but they’d never been allowed up here. He’s always assumed it was just a dustier version of all the storage rooms downstairs but everything was spotlessly clean now.

There were a number of doors off the landing which Hannibal explained were still storage but could be cleaned out later if he ended up needing more space. He apologised that there was no bathroom up here but he could have the hall one immediately downstairs.

Abigail led him into a second room which had larger windows, a wrap-around desk and a comfy leather chair. One wall was decorated with a rack of antlers and Will’s coat was hanging from one of them.

“You can set up your fishing gear in here,” she explained as he swivelled around testing the chair. “There’s lots of space and you can shut the door to keep the dogs out of it. Maybe you can show me how to do it some time.”

“Yes, I’d like that. If Hannibal doesn’t mind.”

“I’m sure you can talk him into it,” she said conspiratorially.

They went back into the bedroom where the others were waiting.

“We’re so happy to have you back,” Alana said wrapping him in a long hug. “Hannibal told us the good news last night and we just wanted you to know how much we all love you and how glad we are that you’re officially part of the family. Not that you weren’t before, but you know.”

“Yeah,” Randall and Abigail agreed a bit shyly.

“Thanks,” Will replied. “I love you all too... Is there anything else I need to know?”

“Not really,” Alana said after thinking for a few moments. “We just respect and communicate with each other. But you do that all the time anyway.”

“Everyone does have their own space,” Hannibal added. “Especially for omegas, I think it’s important you have your own nest up here. Nobody will come up here without your permission. I would never be up here with someone else and we would never be together in

someone else's place without them agreeing. Randall has my bedroom and the garage, Abigail has her rooms, Alana has her house. We're a family but when we need some space for ourselves we have it. If you want a different place, just let us know."

"No, this is amazing," Will jumped in. "I can't believe you did all this for me. Thank you."

They took turns hugging him and wishing him a happy birthday again and then filing back downstairs and then it was just him and the Alpha.

"This took a lot more than one day," he told Hannibal looking at the bed. He knew Alana had only recently taken up quilting and it took her months to finish one. "Did Alana start this the week after I moved back here?"

"That's what I get for mating a detective," the Alpha said leaning in for a brief kiss.

Will felt a little flushed and checked himself in the mirror over the dresser as soon as Hannibal released him but he was nowhere near the colour he remember Randall turning.

"Am I in heat yet?"

Hannibal felt his forehead. "Not yet, pup."

"This is taking forever. Why is it taking forever?"

The Alpha lifted him up again and brought him over to the chairs, settling Will on his lap.

Hannibal kissed him long and slow until Will felt like he was melting into the Alpha's thighs. He was slicking up but it was just an irritating trickle. Meanwhile, the rod in Hannibal's pants was nudging him insistently.

"Isn't there anything you can do to make my heat come faster?" Will groaned.

"I can," Hannibal assured him. "But Will... once I start your heat could come at any time. I'd need to keep you where only I would have access to you. Otherwise, there's a risk another Alpha could claim you."

"I don't care. Just please. If I have to wait one more minute I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin."

The Alpha stood up bringing Will with him. Hannibal laid him down gently on his back on the bed and then climbed over him moving firmly to plant his lips on the omega's. Unlike the earlier smooth and languid kisses these were deep, liquid and searching. Will was left gasping and unsure whether to focus on the carnival at his mouth or the delicious weight of the fully clothed Alpha starting to plunge ever so slowly and rhythmically between his thighs.

Then Hannibal was pulling back a little. But before Will could object he lifted the omega's legs up and yanked up his pants. Will gave a shiver as his nethers were exposed to the cool air and all his skin prickled. It was short lived though because Hannibal was pressing his heat directly into him a moment later.

The pants ended up trapping his knees. “Hold yourself up like this,” the Alpha instructed and Will complied instinctively.

A moment later he felt calloused fingertips lightly petting the contours of his rim reverently gathering up whatever slim offerings of slick Will was capable of giving him. He couldn’t help a full body shiver but the Alpha’s firm hand on his belly held him steady.

Then the hand was gone and he could hear the Alpha unzipping and releasing himself, the unmistakable soft slap of skin on skin, Hannibal’s deep grunt of pleasure. He tried to bend forward to see but his knees were in the way and Hannibal was holding him down on his back. All he could see was the Alpha inhaling deeply at the fingers that had been pressed against him moments ago.

“I thought you said we couldn’t until I’m in heat,” Will stammered unable to keep a thread of nerves out of his voice.

“Shhh,” Hannibal replied. “Just lie still like a good boy. It’s not going to hurt, I promise.”

And then he was pressing his weight down and into and on the omega again, his thick naked cock sheathing itself between Will’s smooth thighs and the grainy hairs from his heavy, pendulous sack lightly tickling at Will’s sit spots driving him mad. Hannibal couldn’t lean down far enough to kiss him because the omega’s legs were in the way but he strained to scent him, his eyes closed as he entered some distant blissed out place.

Will longed to be there with him, reached out for access, but too much was happening in the here and now that was new and amazing. The Alpha was ramming himself deeper and deeper between Will’s legs, giving deep growling moans he could feel on the backs of his calves. The omega marvelled at how much power he could pack, how completely at the Alpha’s mercy he was in this moment and how safe he felt. It was Hannibal after all. He felt wrapped up in the certainty that Hannibal loved him and would always do what was best for him.

The omega leaned back and surrendered to it. He was panting and moaning, letting off weak, desperate sighs he could barely even recognise as coming from his own mouth.

He was so lost in the moment, he almost didn’t notice when the Alpha stopped, pulled back a little and let out a long deep moan. Then something warm and wet was being pressed into his furrow and just into the edges of his hole. For a second he thought it was his own slick but he didn’t remember supplying it.

“What are you doing?”

Hannibal’s voice was soft and worshipful above him, his eyes focused down intently on his work. “You have glands here that stimulate your heat and slick production. I’m just knocking lightly at the door to let them know you have an Alpha waiting for you and he’s getting impatient.”

Before Will could reply, Hannibal’s other hand was clasped around his straining pseudo-cock. The fingers were soaking with the Alpha’s remaining come and the slippery urgent yanking combined with the insistent pressure just at the edge of his hole lit Will’s entire body up. He

felt possessed, like he could rise straight off the bed as much as his back was arching and he was straining for more and more and more.

“Hannibal!” he gasped, dropping both hands down onto his wrist but his Alpha just kept on working him until something snapped and gushed and he was spouting his little offering onto the fingers waiting softly to gather it up.

The Alpha devoured it and then knelt over his omega grinning at him. “You taste exquisite, Will. I knew you would. Tender and sweet like scallops plucked straight from the ocean.”

He tucked himself away with one hand – Will strained but still couldn’t see – and then pulled the omega’s pants back up wiping what was left of the mess on his hands onto the cloth over his thighs.

“Keep those on,” the Alpha said leaning forward to kiss him again.

“Eww... they’re wet.” Will squirmed a little.

Hannibal half rolled him over and gave him a playful slap on the ass.

“Do you remember what we talked about Will? Well, my time is starting right now and until your first heat is over. You’re going to obey me. You’re going to do exactly what I say, exactly when I say it or you’re going to be punished. Do you understand?”

Will sat up on his knees and nodded biting his bottom lip a little.

“I need an answer, pup.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Will responded suddenly feeling both shy and insanely turned on again.

“When we’re on my time, I want you to address me as Master or Sir.”

“Yes, Sir,” Will corrected. He felt butterflies all over his body. Hannibal had hinted that that’s what he wanted but since the first day or two, he had never pressed them on it. This felt more like a game though.

“If you don’t feel safe or you really don’t want to do something, you can say “Wendigo”. If you don’t say “Wendigo” I’m going to assume I can keep going with whatever I want. Do you understand?”

“Yes... Master.” Looking up into the Alpha’s heated eyes, it was a lot easier to say than he thought it would be.

“Good boy. You’re so perfect for me,” Hannibal gave a little groan and knocked him back onto his back with another series of deep bruising kisses.

“You’re going to stay up here in your dirty pants until your heat starts and you’re ready for your Alpha to come and claim you. No touching yourself until I come back either. I’ll know if you do. Do you understand?”

Will mumbled “Yes, Master” again into the assault on his lips.

“That’s my good pup,” Hannibal said standing up suddenly and adjusting his waistcoast. He glanced down warmly at the flushed and panting boy. “Your tablet is in the top dresser drawer. You can text me if you need anything. I have a feeling it shouldn’t be too much longer now.”

And then he was gone, locking the door behind him.

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Too much longer was subjective. Minutes was too long. Hours were impossible. Had it been days already? It might as well have been.

He was bored. All his clothes were itchy. He stripped down to his pants but didn’t dare to shift them. He was hungry but the thought of eating anything made him nauseous. He paced and paced and paced but there was no relief. He was cold. There was a fireplace but no fuel.

He texted Hannibal to say it was too cold but the Alpha didn’t reply. While he had the tablet open, he started up the old games just to hear Hannibal’s voice telling him what a good boy he was. It wasn’t enough though. Why couldn’t he have the real thing now?

He opened the window just to get a breath of fresh air, no matter how chilly. Leaning out a little he could hear noises from the open window of the room next door, like furniture being dragged across a wooden floor. That was one of the locked rooms that Hannibal said was for “storage”. Why was he still shifting things around in there now? How could that be more important than looking after his omega?

It was a dormer window with a narrow stretch of sloped roof under it. Will knelt on the sill and leaned as far out as he could while still keeping his shins in his own bedroom for plausible deniability.

Whatever Hannibal was shifting, it must be massively heavy. Will could hear it scraping across the floor in sharp bursts punctuated by stillness.

Overcome with curiosity, the omega crawled across the roof to peek into the neighbouring window.

It was Hannibal after all pushing what looked suspiciously like a medieval torture rack covered in black leather padding into the centre of a room filled with similar devices set into the walls and hanging from the ceilings.

When he’d finished placing it where he wanted it, the Alpha turned to half face the window. Will tried to skootch back and flatten himself out of sight but misjudged his centre of gravity and found himself sliding down faster than he anticipated with nothing to grasp ahold of when he missed his grab for the windowsill. He gave a little yelp as he came clear off the side of the roof three stories up but managed to lodge his elbow and forearm in one of the gutters.

He had light scrapes all over his bare chest, arms and chin. The gutter was starting to creak in a concerning way. The eaves were too wide for him to brace his legs on the walls and take some of his weight off them. He gave a soft yelp and then looked up to see a very unimpressed Alpha staring down at him.

Hannibal had to lean so far out the window to reach him, Will was worried he was going to drag both of them out to their deaths. There was no shirt to grasp on to and his forearm was slippery from the leaves in the gutter but the Alpha locked both hands around one of his elbows with an iron grip and pulled him straight up.

Instead of setting him down though, Hannibal started carrying him across the dungeon without a word.

“You didn’t say I had to stay in the bedroom,” Will tried to object as the Alpha set him back on his feet facing directly into the corner.

He cringed a second later at the strain in Hannibal’s voice when he said, “Not one more word, William. Keep your nose pointed right here until I come back and get you.”

Behind him, he could hear the Alpha pacing on the other side of the room, letting out long hot breaths. From the corner of his eye, he could see him shaking out his hands a little in frustration.

Fat hot tears started straight away. He was screwing up everything. He’d just almost died because he couldn’t follow the simplest instructions. Hannibal was pissed at him and he had every right to be. He couldn’t even tell him off straight away he was so angry. He’d worked so hard to show the Alpha that he was all grown up now and here he was blubbing like one of the cubs.

What if he just called the whole thing off? Will gave a sob at the thought and then there was no way to stop himself. He wedged his forehead into the corner so he wouldn’t drop out of it and then his whole body was shaking. He wrapped his arms around himself but it wasn’t enough.

A few seconds later though, Hannibal was back and gathering him up in his arms. “OK, pup,” he was whispering right over his ear. “Come here. You’re OK now.”

“I’m sorry,” Will whimpered into the crook of the Alpha’s neck. Hannibal swayed gently with him not saying anything for a long time.

“OK,” Hannibal said finally, his voice calm, giving him a final pat on the back of his head. He stepped back a little and broke the embrace leaving Will feeling miserable and exposed. The Alpha led him over to sit on one of the benches and gently checked some of the scratches on his chest and arms.

“I am sorry,” Will tried again. “I just missed you.”

“No,” the Alpha corrected, a little edge of annoyance creeping back into his voice. “You were bored and you weren’t taking our arrangement seriously. If I tell you to do something there’s

a reason for it. You need to trust me. That I know what's best. Otherwise this is never going to work."

Will only heard the last bit and suddenly felt wretched, the tears springing up again.

"Come here," Hannibal said with a sigh but instead of hugging him again, he turned him around and started gently guiding the omega down onto the bench.

"What are you going to do to me?" Will asked, his voice suddenly tiny.

"You're getting a spanking so you can be my good pup again. And then you're going straight back to bed where you're going to wait patiently until you're ready to be claimed."

Will felt his cock twitching, a clench under his navel, but that had to be wrong. A product of a quick brush against the leather padding or the Alpha's deep voice, not the words he was actually saying.

Will tried to sit up again but Hannibal held him pinned by his back against the middle pad while he reached down and secured Will's wrists and ankles in soft cuffs to each of the legs of the bench.

"Can't we do a normal spanking?" he tried to negotiate seeing Hannibal retrieve a paddle from one of the cabinets that looked like half a tree trunk with holes drilled in it to boot. He craved skin to skin contact with the Alpha, even if it was to get his backside smacked.

"If you want me to stop, you just need to say the word. Do you want me to stop?"

Will considered it, but a part of him was reaching out to the Alpha begging for his forgiveness. And that part wasn't going to rest until he felt like he deserved it. Like they were finally even again.

"No," Will mumbled into the padding.

Almost immediately, the Alpha's massive hand came down with a crack across both Will's cheeks at the same time. He gave a little jerk in response but the bench held him firmly in place. Nowhere to hide.

"What was that?" Hannibal asked patiently.

"No, Master," Will corrected after a little thought.

"That's better," the Alpha said but spanked him again almost immediately in exactly the same spot.

"When it's my time, who's in charge?"

"You are, Sir." Another crack.

"What do you do when I'm in charge?"

“Whatever you say, Master.” And another one. The stinging was lasting longer now and Will was ready for him to move to a different part of his ass thank you very much.

“Did I ask you to be a good boy and wait in your room for me or did I ask you to crawl around half naked on my roof?”

“The first one,” Will chose and then added another hasty “Sir” after an even harder smack. Worse than the impact was the knowledge that he was leaking pretty freely now from both his cock and his hole. Maybe he’d go into heat right here. Would Hannibal finish the spanking or forget the whole thing and claim him immediately? Will gave a little groan, not well disguised as pain.

“Good,” Hannibal said firmly pulling the sides of Will’s pants down so they rested just under his cheeks. “You’re getting fifteen for being disobedient and reckless and for making up excuses to try to get out of your punishment. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master.” He squirmed but he was getting nowhere. He was on this rack until Hannibal decided he was getting off of it but for some reason he felt safe and loved as well, the pressure from the pad almost like a hug now that it had warmed up a little under his skin. The tight little prickles of pain from the scrapes on his chest just heightened his anticipation.

And then the paddle connected with his backside for the first time.

It was completely different from a belt or a cane. No sharp sting but a deep thudding shudder that ran all the way up into his chest - except instead of feeling like pain it was like his heart was relaxing into it, waiting eagerly for the next one to take him even deeper.

He lost count almost immediately. It was just his Alpha making it all better for him for as long as he needed it - wanting him to be a good boy again - wanting to be a good boy for his Alpha. Everything in the past washed away, draining out of him.

He went limp except for the pooling tightness in his crotch, couldn’t even find the energy to clench when he knew another whack was coming. Hannibal was slowing down and lightening up as well. He’s done something so stupid, had hurt his Alpha, but they’d found a way to work through it together.

Hannibal unlocked him and lifted him up and Will buried himself into his Alpha craving both his strength and his warmth. How many arms did he have? They seemed to be everywhere holding everything up and together.

Hannibal carried him back into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, still enveloping Will in his arms.

“How are you feeling, pup?”

“Amazing,” Will said, surprising himself a bit. His ass was hot and throbbing but it didn’t hurt exactly. Meanwhile the whole rest of his being was singing with happiness. He felt like a string that had just been tuned to vibrate in perfect harmony with his Alpha.

“Thank you,” the omega said leaning back just a little so he could look up into Hannibal’s eyes. He was a little surprised by the depth of relief that he saw there.

“My heart couldn’t bear it if you were injured, Will. If you’re not capable of worrying about your own well-being, can you at least consider mine in the future?”

“I know. You’re right. I’m so sorry.”

“It okay now, pup. You’re forgiven.”

Hannibal was standing and then setting him down on the bed, stroking his hair back. When he moved to pull his hands back though, Will clasped onto them.

“Don’t go! Please!”

“Okay, Will,” the Alpha responded. “I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep but then I have to make dinner and take care of a few other things.”

Will released his hands and Hannibal took his shirt and tie off lying next to him. The omega wrapped around his chest relishing the tickle of his soft chest hair against his cheek.

I love you so much. Don’t ever get up and go again. Will wanted to say it but obviously it was impossible to stay here, exactly like this, forever. He wasn’t even claimed yet. What was that going to feel like? It already seemed like Hannibal was some kind of addiction that had crept up on him.

“What if I go into heat?” Will was suddenly so tired he could barely string words together.

“Don’t worry. I’ll know and I’ll take care of everything. Shh, pup. Just get some rest now,” Hannibal kissed his forehead and brushed the flanks of his back in long strokes.

Will dropped off like a rock.

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“Come here, Will.”

He felt like he was floating instead of walking along a long marble hall surrounded by portraits of strangers who all had one or two traits that reminded him of Hannibal. There’s his nose, his cheekbones, his hands. He could hear music in the distance - some kind of Baroque dance.

It was sweltering and dark, with only the faintest breeze and glow of candlelight from the open door at the end of the hall. He felt drawn towards it. That’s where his Alpha would be waiting for him.

He paused when he reached the threshold. It was too dark to see very far inside but Hannibal was standing there, a late teen in his boarding school uniform, holding out one hand to lead him inside.

“It’s okay, pup,” he said. His voice was older and confident. “Come with me. I’ll take care of you.”

Will took his hand and just like that they were dancing in the room together. He was spinning and couldn’t quite get his bearings. His grip on Hannibal was the only thing anchoring him.

“Where are we?” he gasped unable to take in anything except brief glimpses of the Alpha’s face when he was spun in that direction. Hannibal looked lighter somehow but still had his singular focus.

“My uncle’s house in Paris. I grew up here.”

He was wandering in the Alpha’s memories again although this time it felt different. Less like a dream, more like consciousness.

“Sorry,” he offered shyly. “I really don’t know how to control it.”

“It’s okay,” Hannibal told him, bringing him in closer and swaying with him now. “I want you here.”

“Is this your ballroom?” He still couldn’t see very much of it. There was furniture on the edge of the shadows, but Hannibal kept sweeping him away from it.

The Alpha gave a little snort of affectionate laughter. “No. It’s Lady Murasaki’s chamber.”

Oh. Oh... She’d written about her chamber in her journals and the kinds of things she liked to do there. Or the kinds of things she liked Robertas to do to her there. His ass had been throbbing lightly from the spanking but now it surprised him with a firm clench.

“I wish you could have met her. She would have loved you. You have a similar spirit of adventure.” The Alpha leaned in and captured his lips again. How did he manage to do so many things at the same time? Will was trying not to stumble over his own feet.

“I read her journal,” Will panted when he was released for a second. He was embarrassed to be sweating so hard onto Hannibal’s cheek but the Alpha didn’t seem to mind, just pulled him in closer and closer.

“Oh, yes.” Hannibal was nosing around his ear and massaging further and further down his back so it was hard to tell if he was making fun of him or not. The Alpha started peeling off their upper layers and dropping them to the floor. “What did you think?”

“I kind of know what to do,” Will said, helping with one sleeve. “I just don’t want to mess it up.”

“You can’t,” the Alpha breathed into his ear. “You’re perfect no matter what you do. Just relax and feel it. Feel me.”

How did he feel? Impatient. Aching. Ready to be intoxicated inside him. His whole being wanted to give Hannibal that.

The Alpha led him over until he was half sitting on the edge of a bench and was pulling off Will's pants. At this level he could admire the pattern of the even scattering of hair under the Alpha's navel getting thicker and darker just over his belt. The sharp lines of his abs. His amazing scent. Will was slicking up in earnest now, conscious that there was no barrier between his naked ass and the cool leather seat of the bench. The padding was starting to get damp.

Will tried to lean forward to get more and more of Hannibal's scent, but the Alpha stepped back to pull off his shoes, his socks. Unclasping his belt, unbuttoning his fly. Will should be helping but Hannibal was too quick for him, stepping free of the trouser legs and just standing there in dark black boxer briefs that made the outline of his cock frustratingly difficult to trace. It was huge though and ready to take him.

The Alpha paced around behind him and then Hannibal's strong fingers were wrapped around his hips, pulling him up to get him into the right position, kneeling on the seat of the bench.

"Wait," Will said and Hannibal paused immediately looking at him expectantly. "Can I see it first? Please?"

In response, the Alpha smiled and lifted him, holding him up clinging to his neck with one arm while he pared off his shorts with the other. Then he sat on the bench and lowered Will down onto his knees, caged between the Alpha's long muscular legs and staring directly at his hungry purple cock.

The omega buried his nose at its root, enjoying the powerful masculine aroma, the heat of him against his cheek, Hannibal's groans as the fall of Will's curls on his cock lit up all his nerves. The Alpha leaned forward over him, grasping and kneading at his sore asscheeks, gathering up slick, probing gently at the edges of his hole as Will explored the base of his shaft with his lips and tongue.

All of his anxiety was dropping away, replaced by pure sensation. The slide of damp musky skin on his tongue, pushing the smooth head free from its sheath, Hannibal's grip in his hair tightening, just the right amount of pressure. The other hand anointing the base of his shaft with Will's slick, running up to meet Will's lip like a kiss. The taste of himself, plucked fresh from the ocean and something sharper, urgent but ancient.

Meanwhile Hannibal was groaning, his head thrown back, his eyes closed. It felt amazing for him, but it was too shallow, too soft. By itself, it wasn't going to get him there. And more than anything, Will wanted to make his Alpha erupt with happiness. He did everything for Will. Will wanted to give him everything he had in return.

He slid back a little and then crawled up onto the bench, Hannibal reading his cues and clearing the space for him. He lay down on his belly, the bench ending around his navel, his arms, legs and cock hanging off the edges. The Alpha moved quickly to secure him, lift him up to the right angle, slide something cool and firm down to clench at the base of his cock.

When he was helpless, Hannibal gently readied him, stretching his passage. In truth Will was already so wet down there now he could barely feel what was happening.

As if to make up for the lack of sensation, the Alpha lay down a series of bites and deep sucking kisses across his shoulder blades, his upper arms and the back of his neck, devouring and then releasing him over and over again.

Content that he was ready, Hannibal pressed into him with a long searching slide. His arms wrapped under and around Will stroking the back of his head as he gave a series of desperate whimpers.

He was inside him now, as deep as he could go. Whose turn was it to move? Did the energy have a definable source? Who was pushing, straining, grasping, gnawing? It seemed to have reached an inescapable momentum that just grew and grew.

It was *their* desperate appetite to strip away everything down to the connection seated in the deepest part of him. To absorb him entirely. To stamp him with permanence and to assume ownership.

There was a gripping deep inside of him, like a new seedling's roots relaxing into the earth, taking hold of its final place where the sun would find it every day thereafter. It was matched by teeth fastening, the blinding second of pain, and then bliss spreading everywhere in waves. Blissful eyebrows, blissful kneecaps, blissful toenails, blissful spleen and ligaments. On, over, around, in every part of him.

Floating again but fixed securely. He was being carried somewhere but his eyelids were too heavy to open. They were lying on a bed now, the cool silk of the pillowcases on his cheek, the Alpha's thick twitching knot still buried in him while Hannibal wrapped his arms and legs completely around him like a warm fuzzy blanket.

Hannibal wanted to know if he was okay but couldn't dig his way back up to words. Will hummed to tell him how wonderful he felt. What a good Alpha he was.

# Recreation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Will came back to himself they were entwined in his insanely comfy bed in the middle of his snug and uncluttered room. The sky outside his window was ten different shades of pink. Was it sunrise or sunset? He had no idea.

His Alpha was still wrapped around him fixing him in place. It was probably for the best though. Everything Will could move ached when he tried to move it. He ached inside too, he realised, even when he didn't try to move at all. It wasn't painful exactly, just a bit tender and alien. Like realising for the first time he had an extra limb inverted inside himself.

Hannibal was sound asleep, his soft cock nudged up into and resting on the shelf of Will's ass. It felt completely different like this. Even through the haze of his heat, he'd been more than a bit frightened of it last night. But now it just felt like a large extra finger gently stroking him as he breathed.

He rolled around slowly, trying not to wake the Alpha up. Hannibal gave a disappointed groan but didn't open his eyes. Will fell in love all over again with the way the Alpha's dishevelled bangs fell across forehead. It was so rare that he got to see him with even a hint of something out of place.

Will gently teased the blanket down so he could see a little more of him. How were his upper arms and chest in such perfect proportion? The hair on his big barrel chest formed a heart shape like he'd been crafted according to some classical formula in a Renaissance sculptor's notebook. Even the very tiny paunch in his belly which he was forgetting to hold in now that he was asleep made him more attractive.

Checking that the Alpha's eyes were still closed, Will slowly turned to lie facing the foot of the bed. The blanket just happened to slip further off revealing Hannibal's loose hanging cock, back to its normal flesh colour but still a little shiny in the right light. It was framed evenly on each side by his slightly goaty sack.

Will had his own vestigial package but it had never fascinated him the way his Alpha's did. It was like he was mesmerised by every tiny bounce as Hannibal breathed in and out and then shifted slightly in his sleep so he was more on his back. The Alpha did a little half moon stretch and his lips pursed out a little.

Was he still asleep or just faking it now? Will couldn't tell. Would he be mad that his omega was ogling him while he was unconscious? It was hard to guess. Probably not. He wouldn't list excessive modesty among Hannibal's top ten character flaws.

And why would you be with a cock like that? Even like this it was nice and plump. Will shuddered a little remembering how big it got when the Alpha was rampant for him. He was a bit curious what the middle stages looked like though. How long did it take to get there?

Still asleep? Yes. Will reached out tentatively, softly running the backs of his knuckles along the side of the Alpha's cock, feeling the thick veins just below the skin and supressing a delighted laugh when he got a little twitch in response.

He snuck some light fingers under it to feel its weight and use his thumb to softly pull the covering back a little. For even coverage, he gave another stroke down the other side and now he knew Hannibal was full of shit because he was plumping up already and starting to jut out a little more and if he'd really been asleep he would have reacted more to Will's breath so close to the obviously sensitive and rapidly reddening flesh at his tip.

His eyes were still firmly shut though. We'll see about that, Will thought, as he started licking the shaft and teasing at the bulb with brushes of his lips. The answer to "how long does it take?" was obviously "not very" as the Alpha was fully erect after only a few passes.

Hannibal gave a satisfied groan as his only warning and then a second later he grasped one of Will's ankles, yanked it over to the other side of his chest with half of Will following it and slid up the headboard a little so he was half seated with Will straddling his chest on his knees in reverse. The omega gave a little squawk of surprise and found himself face to face with the member he had been teasing but which was now taking him very seriously.

"Good morning, Will," his Alpha said as if this was a completely normal position for them to find themselves in first thing.

"Good morning, Hanni.. Sir," he replied wincing in anticipation of another smack to his sore rear.

Instead, Hannibal grasped each of his cheeks and separated them giving a long approving huff at whatever he was seeing back there. Will tried to turn to see his expression but Hannibal was already licking his rim, up and down his furrow and starting to press in with his tongue.

Eager to return the favour, Will dipped onto his cock as far as he could go. It, admittedly, wasn't very far at all before he got overwhelmed and had to pull back a little. Hannibal reached down and guided one of Will's hands until it was grasping the rest of his shaft and then he returned to his fervid work between the omega's thighs while he stroked over his knees.

Will was determined to give as good as he got but there were just so many things going on at the same time and he would defy anyone to stay focused and maintain suction when Hannibal was doing whatever the hell he was doing with his tongue and fingers back there. He was pressing into something that was making the omega dissolve every three seconds.

Will pulled back a little to pant and catch his breath but then his Alpha was rolling them over together and stalking over the top of him, hands guiding his cock up and in between the omega's shivering thighs.

He could see his Alpha's face like this and better appreciate the euphoria Hannibal seemed to capture as he bottomed out inside him. It wasn't quite fully in his grasp, but the Alpha started to chase it. Will could almost feel it as well, a little closer each time but not quite there.

Hannibal was nibbling at his chest now, mouthing under his jaw and running both hands up to slide over Will's nipples which seemed to have electrified and been wired directly to his hole.

They were getting closer and closer to it all the time. Will slid his knees up as his toes curled and Hannibal hooked his arms under them pulling them up further, tightening Will's belly and giving him a better angle, rubbing what felt like raw nerve endings down the whole length of his furrow. The omega gasped and threw his head back but he could still see Hannibal's eyes lit with what was becoming a familiar mix of hunger and affection tinged with a hint of self-satisfaction. Somehow Will was doing that and he wasn't even trying really. He felt so filled and floaty he wanted to laugh out loud and shout with it.

Then Hannibal was lifting up and pulling back a little and all Will could think was "No, no, no, no, no" as he wrapped his legs around the Alpha's bottom and tried to pull him back in.

Hannibal gave a little laugh and indulged him with one more slide in before he started pulling halfway out again. "You need to flip over so I can knot you properly," the Alpha explained right at the border between eagerness and impatience.

In the moment though, so close, two seconds apart felt like a disaster to the omega. "Can't I see your face when you finish?" Will begged shifting up on the bed a little to try to hold onto him longer. He could feel the Alpha's swelling just at his lips.

"Be a good pup," Hannibal warned but Will pushed up from his elbows while gathering his legs in at the same time and managed to get the knot in before the Alpha could pull back.

He wanted to laugh at the expression on Hannibal's face. Part disbelief, part indignation, part rapture, a very small part amusement.

When he was over his surprise, the Alpha chose "stern" and tried to pull a little back again but he was already lodged in firmly. Will groaned at the delicious pressure in all the right places forgetting for a second that he was likely to be in for it.

Hannibal tried a few more tugs, then seemed to realise that there was only one way through his dilemma. He started pounding into the omega with purpose setting a punishing pace that made the whole bed shake and the headboard knock against the wall in time with his thrusting.

In the end, Will couldn't see his expression anyway- couldn't keep his eyes open in the face of the onslaught. He just fell slack and let sensation wash through him until Hannibal was gripping his ass like he could pull it off with his fingertips and groaning and latching his teeth into his still raw mating mark.

There was a hot flooding sensation deep inside him as the Alpha spent his claim. Will could almost swear his flat belly was rising up a little with it but then Hannibal closed all the distance between them all but collapsing across the whole length of his body and settling his weight into him.

It felt really nice for a second or two and then Will cleared his throat a little when it was obvious the Alpha didn't intend to move again for the duration.

“Ahem... crushing,” he coughed digging his hands under Hannibal’s solid biceps and trying to push them up. He was getting nowhere with his scrawny protests though.

Eventually the Alpha took pity on him and rolled them onto their sides still joined trying to find a reasonably comfortable position. Will frowned as Hannibal’s cock jostled at his oversensitive inner walls. They ended up with Will’s lower leg tucked under the curve of Hannibal’s upper waist while the other suspended up in air over the Alpha’s top hip. It was OK for now but he suspected after twenty minutes he’d have wicked pins and needles.

“Ow,” he protested playfully as Hannibal’s final shift to cradle his back thrust the tip of his cock into a particularly tender spot.

“You’re the one who was determined to get locked in this position,” the Alpha replied disapprovingly but too recently satiated to be actually angry. “Your curiosity is one of the many things I love about you Will but it is going to be the death of both of us.”

Everything after “love” was just static though. It was one thing to know in his bones that it was true and something completely different to hear it in rumbly, grumpy Baltic tones.

Was the sun suddenly shining brighter through the window now or was his heart shining and warming up the whole room? He couldn’t really tell. He started frantically kissing any part of the Alpha he could reach – mostly chest but some neck and upper arm as well.

“If the idea is to get out of this position some time before noon, you’re going about it the wrong way,” Hannibal fake protested before fake surrendering, rolling Will onto his back again and fucking him breathless and boneless into the mattress again.

Filled with a third load for the day, Will’s belly had a definite swell to it when they rolled back into their agreed “wait-out-the-knot” position again. Hannibal was gazing down on it and letting his fingertips play over the omega’s navel.

“Do you think there’s a cub in there already?” Will asked hazily, three quarters of the way asleep already. Who the hell was this sappy mental intruder who was hoping desperately it was true? Was that him or Hannibal? It was harder to separate them out when they were joined like this.

“If there isn’t, there soon will be,” the Alpha promised him with a kiss to his forehead.

He brushed back his hair again and said, “If I saw you everyday for the rest of my life forever, Will, I would remember this time” as the omega drifted off perfectly contented.

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When he woke up, he was alone in the bed, crinkling his nose at the sticky, sweaty crumpled sheets but there was Hannibal coming in the door in a three piece suit with a tray laid out with a full English breakfast and now he was ravenous again. Had he even eaten anything yesterday? Some cake maybe around lunchtime?

Shifting to sit up, he felt something dragging inside his hole. The Alpha had left something inside of him to seal him up and keep him loose for the next wave of his heat. It felt a little awkward while he worked out where to sit but by then he had more important things to focus on.

“I was going to say you need to make sure and keep your energy up,” Hannibal said after placing the tray over his lap and watching Will try to lift an entire fried egg up to his mouth on a spoon. “But I can see that isn’t going to be an issue.” The egg slid off almost immediately to the omega’s dismay.

Risking the Alpha’s wrath but figuring he’d earned a little slack that morning, Will abandoned the spoon and shoved the egg in with his fingers. The fried bread and sausage were easy, the fried tomatoes a bit more difficult because the juices were still hot. That just left the blood pudding. He hadn’t seen that on his plate since he was a cub, at least four different lifetimes ago.

He looked up at Hannibal a little uncertainly. Instead of anger at his terrible table manners, though, the Alpha looked enchanted that Will was so eager to consume what he’d put in front of him.

“Is that from the dragon?”

“Yes,” Hannibal responded sitting on the bed next to him, shaking out a napkin and belatedly laying it over Will’s bare chest. Then he picked up one of the black discs from the plate and started offering it to the omega.

“I’m really full now,” Will tried to protest. He wasn’t fooling anyone though. He would have eaten a second full platter in a hot minute if Hannibal offered it to him.

In retrospect, he knew that Hannibal had been feeding him people since he arrived at the house all those years ago. They’d had a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy since he’d come back. It had never been deliberate or out in the open like this. The freezers were almost empty and there wasn’t much in the way of a fresh source to refill them, so Will assumed they were mostly getting their immunity from the mushrooms.

“It’s just meat,” Hannibal told him. “No different than what you eat any other day. If you knew the name of the lamb in those sausages would it make any real difference to how much you enjoyed them? It’s just a psychological block I know you can overcome. And remember it’s not just for yourself anymore. You’re still dangerously thin and you need to be in good condition to carry my cubs. It’s important to build up their resistance to the virus as well as to give them the best possible start in life. Zeller has been doing some research that suggests the cubs may be able to build up an ability to synthesize GJH-63 from a number of different protein sources if they are exposed to it early enough. I’m afraid I really must insist Will.”

And we’re still on your time goes without saying, Will thought. Why did I agree to this stupid arrangement? He could always safeword though. Coerced cannibalism was a grey area in the terms and conditions.

Was this the hill to die on though? Francis Dolarhyde was a despicable serial killer who had murdered Franklyn, kind of Will's friend or at least acquaintance. And he'd kept Reba prisoner all those years. Will really needed the GJH-63 to survive and so did his (maybe, hopefully, seriously Will?) cub. If he didn't eat it Hannibal would. Or it would go to waste. Whose interest did that serve? It's not like it made the slightest bit of difference to the dragon or anyone who knew him.

He opened his mouth and let Hannibal set the little ring of meat in it. He chewed it a bit more than the rest. The texture wasn't his favorite but he was starving hungry enough that anything that registered as edible was going straight down the hatch.

It was well worth it too to see Hannibal leaning over him and looking at him like he was the second coming. The Alpha lifted what was left of the tray off his lap. Will gave a little mourning protest for the cup of tea he hadn't made it to but then Hannibal was on his tongue and carding through his hair and lowering between his legs again and everything else was forgotten.

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Hannibal stepped out of the bath and towelled himself off feeling sore but satisfied. His vanity would allow that he wasn't the youngest buck anymore, but he was keeping up with four mates. He wasn't quite used to the physical demands of an omega in full heat – Randall hadn't had a real one since Hans was born. But he found that the more his services were needed, the more capacity he seemed to have. And fortunately Will would only require half a dozen mountings a day for a few days every couple months.

His other mates had agreed not to set up a schedule but had fallen into an informal one anyway. Randall liked waking up to a quick hard fuck to help him work off his usual morning stiffness. Abigail liked to be put to bed with something soft and gentle. Alana consulted some mystical schedule of her own and would carve him off for a few days here and there with permission from the others for something creative and generally food-based. He'd have to find a way to fit Will's regular needs in there as well once they both understood them better.

He could have bigger problems though, he told himself as he picked out his tie for the day, moss green and cream paisley to pick up the faint flecks of green in his tweed overcoat.

Everything was getting back on track now that Will had accepted his place in the pack. Had he smelled a little different when Hannibal scented him just before crawling off of him to let him sleep off the last foggy hours of his heat? He thought he did, but it was too early to be sure. He shouldn't get his hopes up, but he had an intuition that Will would breed easy like his brother had in the beginning. And if not this time, it was just a few short months until he could try again. Nobody could say he hadn't put in the effort over the past three days. And they had all the time in the world now.

Randall had produced his one perfect firstborn Alpha cub – with double Alpha chromosomes no less. Given the unusual situation, that had to be extremely rare and must mean something for the cub's future. He couldn't be more pleased with his progeny to date and it certainly wasn't Randall's fault that he couldn't have more. Hannibal didn't blame him and had worked diligently not to express disappointment in any way that the pup could ever pick up

on. But now he felt like he was pulling out and dusting off some long-neglected ambitions from the back of his mental wardrobe.

What kind of cubs would Will produce? Dark curly haired ones full of mischief no doubt. Would they inherit his uncanny insight, keen curiosity and self-assuredness? The Alpha hoped so.

Walking back into the bedroom, he could see Randall splayed out upside down with his head hanging off one side of the mattress pretending not to be watching for him.

“Good morning, pup,” Hannibal told him leaning down to kiss his mouth despite the awkward angle.

“Good morning,” his mate replied rolling over on his stomach and struggling to untangle himself from the sheets. “Is Will OK?”

“He’s having a rest for now, but I’m sure he’ll be eager to catch up later today,” Hannibal responded before suddenly gathering Randall up in his arms and lifting him off the bed. He gave a surprised but not unhappy squawk and twisted to get down.

The Alpha didn’t have far to carry him though - just to the writing desk in the corner where he set Randall down in the chair.

“Does he like his room?”

“I think we can call it a roaring success,” Hannibal answered pulling some paper and pencils out of one of the drawers. He was amused to see Randall’s face fall and to hear his little groan as soon as he spotted them. The ghost of homework assignments past, no doubt. They’d managed basic literacy after many long relationship-testing hours but the only subjects Randall had ever shown any real passion or aptitude for were mechanical engineering and zoology so Hannibal had stopped pushing the other formal lessons fairly soon after he turned 18 and just let him study what he liked on his own time. He’d done his best. His older omega was just never going to be an academic.

“Thank you for all of your hard work arranging it,” he added with a kiss to the crown of Randall’s head.

“What’s this for?” the pup asked, his curiosity finally overcoming his dread.

“I’m going to go downstairs and cook breakfast now and while I do I want you to write down five things you want for your birthday just for yourself. No writing down things that are really for Hans or Will or me. You’re a very good pup and you deserve to have everything in the world that you want,” Hannibal gave him another kiss just behind the ear and then smoothed the rest of his hair down.

Randall gave a little gulp and eyed the pencils uncertainly. “I don’t really know. I hadn’t thought about it.”

“That’s okay. Think about it now and when I come back up we can discuss it.”

Hannibal left him sitting there, intercepting their cub at the door and leading him downstairs to help with the cooking so his daddy could have some peace and quiet.

The Alpha found himself swelling with satisfaction with his little family and wanting to reward all of them however he could. All the things that he would normally be getting after his mates and cubs for suddenly seemed sweet and endearing instead - from Hans pouring more frozen blueberries into his mouth than the batter, Alana's third cup of black coffee while she was still nursing, the little boys giggling about bodily functions, Camille's princess wand shedding glitter all over his table, Martin happily gumming up the recipe card he'd left on the counter while Abigail was distracted stealing extra croissants behind his back.

Everything was going to get better from here on out. His growing pack was happy and cared for, mostly well-behaved and bursting with potential.

He even found himself whistling cheerfully as he headed upstairs forty minutes later with two trays, one for each of the omegas. Will was still conked out, splayed like a starfish across the whole bed. He left the tray on the bedside table. There was nothing there that would go off even if his exhausted pup slept until noon.

The other tray he brought down to Randall who was still hunched over the desk chewing the pencil eraser.

"Right, what do we have?" the Alpha asked snapping up the paper and noting immediately that he had only made it to number four.

"Sorry, I'm not really done yet," Randall said a little bashfully.

Hannibal looked with a mixture of amusement and dismay at the still slightly childish handwriting spelling out:

"1. Cheeseburger and coke
2. Cake for breakfast but not a big party
3. Go somewhere
4. Sex."

"This is absolutely everything your heart desires in the world, pup? Nothing for number five?" He was teasing a little but also slightly deflated. Randall had had the better part of an hour to try to come up with something and still hadn't managed to finish.

While Hannibal had done everything he could for the past six years to help the pup shore up his identity and sense of self-worth there was no snapping his fingers and undoing almost sixteen years with his abusive waste of a sire. Hannibal had benefited to the extent that the pup's starvation for basic affection and attention had made him easier to train but there were times like this where it was somewhat inconvenient.

"If I want two cheeseburgers, can I have them both for number one or do I have to use number five for the second one?"

Hannibal looked at him flatly but before he could respond the pup suddenly perked up and said, “Canned bacon!”

He snatched the paper back and started writing it with an impish grin. Hannibal was tempted to snatch it back and write number six “spanking” but decided on a different tack.

“Well, it is your special day and I did say you could have whatever you want,” the Alpha mused. “If you want to spend one of your wishes ingesting expired gelatinous pork byproducts stuffed with nitrates that will trigger a migraine and leave you unable to enjoy any of your other presents or to perform sexually, that is entirely your affair.”

Randall looked at him blankly. Then looked back at the paper and scratched out the fifth item with a sigh.

“I’ll make it simple for you,” Hannibal said. “Do you want two cheeseburgers or two orgasms?”

“Does that make it simpler?” the omega replied staring up into space. Hannibal suspected that unfortunately he wasn’t joking. In fairness, he got orgasms fairly regularly and hadn’t had a cheeseburger in six years – or the prospect of another one in the future if his Alpha had anything to say about it.

Hannibal moved to take the page away again but Randall curled around it saying “OK, OK” and scratching ‘More sex’ in next to the scribbled out part by number five.

“Thank you very much,” Hannibal said primly as he pulled the list away again. “I’ll see what I can do.”

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Cake for breakfast was the easy one although Hannibal had to insist that they all get at least a little protein into their systems first before the sugar hit. He smiled watching Randall and Hans feeding each other frosting in perfect happiness, the cub giggling and squirming, unable to believe his luck.

There was a big pile of presents for Randall to open – mostly tools and books about how to build things plus boxes of random things he would need for different projects he was working on. Was he mated to someone who was this genuinely excited about getting cans of spray paint for his birthday? Yes, somehow he was. Love was a truly mysterious force.

Hans gave his daddy a drawing of a big bank of surveillance TV screens with a portrait of each member of the family in each square and sat for quite a while on Randall’s lap explaining what each of them were doing.

While they were distracted, Hannibal, Zeller, Will and Abigail loaded up the RV for their trip. Randall’s head kept turning to watch them carrying out coolers and chests of other gear but he was buried in cubs asking him questions and volunteering to test his presents for him so he couldn’t follow them out to snoop.

When everything was ready, Hannibal went back into the dining room, lifted Hans up off his daddy's lap and explained to him that they were both going away for a little trip for the day but that they'd be back in time for dinner and to be good for Auntie Alana.

The cub threw a hysterical screaming fit the likes of which none of them had seen before and had to be pried off his Papa's neck while Randall looked at him clearly thinking "Can't he just come too?".

It was a difficult call. Hannibal didn't want to reward his tantrum but he also knew that the cub had never been physically separated from both of his parents by more than a room or two or for more than a few minutes in his entire life and maybe a whole day without either of them and no Uncle Will or Aunt Abigail either was too much to ask.

If where they were going was really that dangerous, he wouldn't have been bringing the omegas in the first place. He had Zeller and Abigail and the two biggest dogs to help guard them. And the cub, who in his five and a half years had never set foot outside their little compound the size of a city block, was going to have to learn a little bit about the outside world eventually if he was going to grow into his role.

"OK," Hannibal said setting him down on the table. "It's Daddy's birthday today, remember, so we have to give him whatever he wants. What do you think pup?"

"Thanks a lot for making this my problem," he could see Randall thinking as the Alpha smiled at them both mildly.

"I don't really know where we're going or what we're doing but I guess it's OK if you think it is," his mate offered noncommittally.

"Good," Hannibal concluded. "Abigail, why don't we bring Robbie as well? They can keep each other occupied."

She nodded and smiled, obviously guessing at what Hannibal intended to be doing while the cubs were 'occupied.'

Randall carried Hans into the RV, the little cub refusing to let go of him now after his earlier scare. Hannibal ushered all of the rest of them in, gave Alana a kiss goodbye (she had volunteered to watch the younger cubs and the house since she got seasick easily) and then nodded for Zeller to start up the engine for their big adventure feeling like he was taking them away camping for a few weeks instead of out on the town for a few hours.

Abigail tried to distract the cubs with a game of Uno but it was hopeless. They were glued to the window behind the bench seat looking out for "monsters" the whole drive over. Will sat behind them in case he needed to reassure them - not that they saw much except for glimpses of shambling figures in some of the alleyways.

Five years had thinned the population in the city a bit. Quite a few infected had wandered off into the countryside once they'd run out of easy pickings in the city, some had met with random mishaps, and Hannibal's pack had systematically cleared as many as they could within a few blocks of the compound each way. Once they were past the outer perimeter it

wasn't unusual to see small packs of infected but it was extremely rare to see a really dangerously-sized hoard anymore.

And Francis Dolarhyde had done them the favour of clearing the area immediately around the science centre. What he hadn't gotten, Hannibal had taken care of when he came back to clean up the bodies and prep for today. They pulled up close to the entrance to the main foyer and would stay away from the theatre at the back which was still too much of a mess to expose the cubs to. He had a sense that all Randall would care about was the dinosaurs anyway and he was right.

Before he let them out of the RV, Hannibal instructed the cubs to take one hand each, Hans from him and Randall, Robbie from Abigail and Will, and not to let go for any reason unless they were told to. It didn't last long though. As soon as they were inside, Randall was dazzled - wandering from display to display lifting his cub up to let him reach over and touch the bones and reading each of the captions with him. Hannibal hung back a little covering the doors and enjoying their enjoyment.

"Look at the doggy's teeth, Papa!" Hansel was stroking the long fangs at the sabre-tooth tiger exhibit.

"That's very impressive," Hannibal acknowledged distracted for a second by the expression of perfect gratitude Randall was shooting him over the cub's head. "It's actually more like a very large cat."

"Like Uncle Jimmy's?"

"Maybe distant relations..."

"Will Uncle Jimmy's cats get this big?"

Hannibal collected him out of his mate's arms and wandered off fielding more of the cub's questions to give Randall a little time to enjoy the exhibits in peace. Hannibal could almost see the gears clicking over in his mind as he traced every single joint with his eyes and then with his hands.

Then Robbie pounced on his brother from behind one of the tables and they both started shrieking and running around. Hannibal decided this was a good opportunity to practice "how we behave beyond the boundary" with his two oldest cubs. Emphasising "indoor voices" he showed them how to stalk each other more effectively and where the best hiding spots were.

When the cubs were starting to get hungry and fussy, Hannibal dragged Randall away and into the gift shop where they picked up what seemed like every other book to add to their collection. They loaded everything up into the RV without incident and then headed for the marina a few blocks away.

It was a bright sunny day which made it less likely that there were infected about but this was the most dangerous part of the trip so Hannibal insisted on checking that the yacht he had selected and the wharf were totally clear again before carrying the cubs onboard quickly. Randall kept them occupied below deck while the others raced to load up the rest of the gear.

The Alpha didn't really relax until the ship cleared the dock. Zeller was driving the RV back with the dogs and would meet them at the boatyard closest to their house at the end of the day. Until then they had nothing to worry about for a change.

Will had assured him he knew how to drive this thing and had brushed up with Bedelia ahead of time so Hannibal went down and fired up the barbecue while the cubs raced around excitedly demanding to know what the different features on the city skyline were, slamming the doors to all the cabins and trying to pry open all of the storage cabinets.

Randall wasn't much better, peeking into the boxes of gear they'd loaded up. Hannibal directed him by the hips into one of the bucket seats on the aft deck next to the barbecue. He opened one of the coolers, took out the solitary Coke on ice with the minimum amount of contact required to maintain his grip and handed it to the pup his arm extended without looking at it. Randall grinned from ear to ear but set it in the cupholder instead of opening it at once preferring to save it to wash down his promised very special (and never to be repeated) meal.

Hans skidded over and then crawled into his Daddy's lap peering up to see what was happening. "What's Papa cooking?"

"The most amazing thing you'll ever taste in your entire life."

"Randall," Hannibal started to scold while the cub giggled. The last thing he needed was his cubs addicted to junk food. He already had qualms about them associating the excitement and pleasure of the day with sugar and saturated fats but he'd walked right into it with Randall so would have to do the best he could to sneak some vegetables in somewhere.

Abigail found the cub-sized life jackets and convinced Hans and Robbie to wear them by pretending they were Junior Explorer uniforms. They both seemed unconvinced that anything fluorescent orange or puffy was meant to be human apparel but as soon as Hannibal backed Abigail up they agreed and even mostly kept them on for the rest of the day.

He was going to have to teach them to swim as well. He'd tried going back to his local pool years ago but it had drained and it seemed like too much work to get it back in operating order and to maintain it regularly just for his own occasional slightly self-indulgent hobby. It's not like he needed more exercise to keep in shape these days. But he wanted his cubs to know all the important life skills, especially the ones that could protect their safety.

It was a gas grill so it didn't take long to prepare the burgers and sausages. Will anchored the boat in a sheltered cove near the mouth of the Chester River and then came up to join them his eyes going wide when he saw what was on the menu. Abigail looked like she was keeping her mouth shut as well in case anything she said accidentally made him change his mind.

Did a concern for basic nutritional principles really make him such a monster in the eyes of all his mates?

They went inside to eat at the dining table since the plush carpeting was more comfortable for the omegas. There was a big bay of windows looking out across the harbour and Abigail

struggled to get the cubs to sit up straight and focus on eating - at least until they got their first taste of burger and then their eyes went wide and they were focused on nothing else.

Hannibal held Randall's burger down for him and noticed the pup's eyes narrow when he saw not just lettuce and tomato but slices of avocado between the buns in addition to the specified meat and cheese. But he decided not to push his luck and ate it anyway, licking happily at the juices spilling down his chin. Compromise was the life-blood of any relationship.

Hannibal held the Coke for him as well and Randall sipped at it with a big grin on his face notwithstanding it was probably stale and flat. The cubs sniffed around wanting to know what it was but the Alpha cheerfully lied to their faces telling them it was a daddy drink and not to worry about it.

After lunch, Will and Randall showed Abigail and the cubs how to set up the fishing gear while Hannibal cleaned everything up from their meal.

It had been close enough to an hour after eating, so Hannibal changed into his swimming trunks and then dove off the aft deck. The cubs couldn't have been more startled if he had suddenly started flying and immediately wanted to learn the new trick.

The water was a little chilly but not unbearable as long as they stayed in the sun. Abigail and the omegas changed into their swim suits and helped the cubs strip down to their underwear with their life jackets still on. Randall and Abigail jumped in and Will lowered Robbie and then Hans into their parents' waiting arms.

Clearly expecting the water to be as warm as their usual baths despite Will's warning, they both gave gasps of shock as soon as their toes were submerged. But they quickly adjusted as Hannibal showed them how to kick their legs and flap their arms to stay up a little higher than the jackets held them. When they were a little more confident, he even let them take their jackets off with the adults holding them up so they could practice floating on the surface of the water.

They were swamped by the odd wave but otherwise seemed to get the hang of it quickly. Meanwhile the adults took turns diving and swimming laps around the boat.

After about half an hour, they started to get tired from the unaccustomed exercise and a bank of clouds blocked the sun so the water was getting chillier. They climbed back onto the boat and Abigail and Will got the cubs changed and ready for their next fun activity – checking to see if they could find any crab pots that were still working.

Hannibal pulled Randall aside and led him into the master bedroom, the pup grinning ear to ear after playing footsie with him under the water and winding him up. He was about to bounce onto the bed when the Alpha crowded him into the shower instead not wanting to get salt water on the sheets or for his mate to chafe too much anywhere uncomfortable.

Randall submitted to about three seconds under the hot shower head before ducking out and eyeing him excitedly. Hannibal quickly passed the spray over as much of himself as he could manage but then the pup was doing a pull up on the shower curtain rod right in front of him

and he couldn't help flicking off the water and lifting Randall belly-side up over his shoulder to carry him back into the bedroom still sopping wet.

He threw him down on the bed and the mattress had enough spring on it that he bounced like a cub on a hopper ball. Randall gave a cheerful little growl and tried to roll off the side back onto his feet but Hannibal grabbed the seat of his swimming trunks and ripped them down to his ankles in a single smooth motion that also knocked the pup flat onto his belly.

As he tried to kick the rest of the way out of his suit, Hannibal bent over to find a good angle to remove his own trunks given the limitations of the waist elastic. By the time he'd managed it the pup was free, back on his feet and eyeing the exit playfully. He only made it about two steps before Hannibal lifted him up by his midsection again. He was slippery though and there was nothing left to grip ahold of so instead of falling on the bed he landed on his feet and jumped to the other side of it and back on the floor again.

They grappled again on the other side of the bed, Randall sliding loose over and over again. The boat was moving which made it harder to keep his balance but the cabin was relatively small so there wasn't much space to avoid each other. Finally, Hannibal managed to snag a good-sized fistful of hair and use it to guide the pup carefully into position over the side of the bed.

Delightfully frustrated and not wanting to give Randall another opportunity to get away, the Alpha fastened his teeth into his mating mark and then mounted him insistently still struggling a little to keep him in place as Randall alternated between moaning, going slack and half slipping off the bed, and growling while struggling to climb back on to it - his hard little pseudocock being driven over and over again into the soft dip at the side of the mattress.

Hannibal would usually hold back a little, worried that unleashing the full force of his appetite would frighten or upset the pup, but he knew what Randall liked best and it was his birthday and he was getting whatever he wanted today. What Randall wanted was to submit to some primal part of himself that existed outside of words and nameable feelings – to wrestle with and be overcome by a solid power greater than his own that would still keep him safe.

He realised now that he needed to give his omegas more credit for knowing what they wanted and for being able to handle it.

Hannibal pulled out and stood up, pleased at the sight of the thick droplets of slick that had already coated the peaks and valleys of his lightly quivering cock.

Randall gave a long moan of disappointment and dropped onto all fours, shifting around to keep facing him as he walked over to the chair where he'd folded his clothes earlier. Hannibal picked up his belt, folded it over several times and then walked back purposefully toward Randall who was backing into the corner with something like a snarl forming at his lip.

Before he could respond, Hannibal grabbed his hair again with his free hand, stepped over him so he was straddling his shoulders, squeezing him in place with his thighs, and then held the belt out in front of him.

“Bite down on this,” he ordered letting his voice out to play. He didn’t have long to wait until his mate complied but while he did he rubbed his rigid member through the damp hair at the back of his head.

Once Randall had the belt in his mouth, he tried to lunge forward but Hannibal dropped his weight on him, demonstrating his superior size and strength. Randall might be more muscular than an omega but he was no match for his Alpha and loved being reminded of it.

Getting up to his knees again, Hannibal yanked a grey sable coat off its hanger in the closet and dropped it into Randall’s back. Then he hitched his mate’s hips up to the right angle, pulled the tail of the coat up to expose his hole, and draped himself over Randall’s back as he pressed into him again.

Randall gasped and the belt dropped out of his mouth before he realised it. Hannibal retrieved it and lodged it back between his teeth leaning over to whisper, “Keep this in place or I’m going to tan your backside with it.”

The instinct to rut overcame him almost at once and he started pounding into his soft warm mate trapped under him, the slight rolling of the deck under his knees also feeding into his need to secure and stabilise them somehow.

Randall was giving off something between a moan and a long purr which Hannibal could feel on his chest even beneath the tickle of the fur. His mate’s face was turned to one side beneath him and Hannibal could see his pupils were blown out and he was gasping with pleasure.

“That’s my good boy,” Hannibal told him, petting his hair while his knot started to swell and catch on his mate’s rim. He was so wet for his Alpha but still tight and responsive.

Then he was too big to pull free and his abrupt attempts to tug back prompted Randall to clench so hard around him his final deep thrust and discharge was more reflexive than conscious.

They all but collapsed on the floor together. Hannibal tucked the coat around Randall to cover him better and keep him warm. He was so groggy he barely even seemed to notice when Hannibal licked under his ear and along the bottom of his jaw.

Some part of him was still awake though. When Hannibal asked, “Did you get everything you wanted, pup?” he gave a long satisfied groan and snuggled deeper into his Alpha.

“Good,” Hannibal responded arranging his damp curls around his ears into something a little more closely resembling order while he stroked him under the navel. “I love you, Randall, and you deserve to have all of the nice things.”

If he hadn’t still been lodged inside him would he have noticed the way his mate’s breath caught at the middle bit? Randall was pretended to be asleep, not sure how to respond. There was no rush, though. He could come back to him in his own time.

“Just remember that,” the Alpha said with a final kiss to the back of his neck before dropping off himself.

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Randall was still fast asleep, wrapped around the coat now, as Hannibal took another quick shower and dressed. He lifted the pup up onto the bed and tucked him in before rejoining the rest of his pack on the deck.

They hadn't had much luck with the crab pots on this side of the bay. They'd salvaged half a dozen ones that were empty but still in working order so they could bait them and try again later. Will had also set half a dozen lines and was showing Robbie how to tie a drop shot knot without much success. His chubby four year old fingers were not quite ready yet to follow the omega's deft example.

It didn't help that the cubs were all but falling over on their feet by this point. Hannibal lifted them up to put them down for a nap in the twin cabin when one of the lines started twitching and clicking. The cubs pointed excitedly. Uncle Will jumped up to reel in their catch, trying to explain to Abigail what he was doing but not having much luck over the cubs' chattering and squealing and urging him to pull harder.

They gasped when he finally managed to lift their catch clear over the side of the deck. It was a fat striped bass longer than Will's arm and he had to lean back a little to hold it up at a height that the cubs could admire it. It was twenty or twenty-five pounds at least. Hannibal's mouth was already watering at the prospect of fresh caught fish for the first time in years - and plenty to share with the whole pack.

The cubs gasped and squealed again when the still living fish flicked its tail and splashed water all over them. Then Robbie started crying a little because some salt had gotten in his eye.

Abigail collected them and carried them inside for their nap. Once they were inside, Will lay the fish on the bench, unhooking it and Hannibal stunned it with a mallet and then yanked out its gills with pliers watching the blood stream down the sides of the fish into the bucket of water beneath it.

Turning back to share the moment with the omega, he noticed that Will had turned green and his eyes were glazed over. It was surprising because both pups had told him they had gone fishing with their sire many times in their previous life and had always eaten their catch. Surely he couldn't be that unfamiliar with or upset by what the Alpha was doing.

Before he could ask, though, Will leaned over the side of the deck and emptied the contents of his stomach into the water.

Hannibal dropped the fish into one bucket, rinsed his hands in a clean one and then went over to rub Will's back and help hold him steady. When he came back up, Hannibal gathered him on his lap but one look at the blood dripping down the side of the bench had him turning around and spewing a second time.

Finally, Hannibal carried the omega in to one of the cabins and set him on the bed ducking briefly into the mini-fridge to get him a bottle of water to rinse with.

“Sorry,” Will mumbled after he’d recovered a bit of composure.

“Not at all,” Hannibal replied, smoothing back his hair and checking his eyes.

“I don’t want to spoil Randall’s trip.”

“I don’t think Randall has noticed so far,” the Alpha said tamping down his smirk. “But you may be the only one who knows how to get us back to shore so you need to take care of yourself.”

“I don’t know what came over me. It’s not like I haven’t dressed fish a million times before.” Will shuddered and Hannibal cut him off before he could make himself ill again.

“Don’t worry about it, darling. It’s been a long time since you’ve had to use your sea legs and it’s been a very busy day. Why don’t you just lie down and rest now and I’ll call you when it’s time for supper?”

Will lay down again but then stood up again almost at once. Hannibal paused at the door to see if he needed anything else.

“Sorry, I just have to pee.”

“Actually,” Hannibal said, his mind suddenly clicking over, “why don’t you save some of it?” He handed the omega a clean mug.

“You don’t think, really?” Will asked his eyes going wide.

“I have a test with the gear,” the Alpha said. “I’ll go and get it.”

“Of course you do,” Will groaned with more fondness than genuine annoyance.

When Hannibal returned, the omega was sitting obediently with his legs up on the bed, back resting on the headboard and a little mug of pee on the nightstand. Hannibal dipped the test into it for the required length of time and then crawled onto the bed to wait out the results, curling Will up into his lap.

“How are you feeling, Will?” The omega was trembling slightly in his arms.

“Not quite on solid ground, but not in a bad way, I guess. I just want to know one way or the other and then I can work out how I feel about it.”

Hannibal let his thoughts drift a little inhaling his mate’s usual thistly blueberry scent mixed with more salt than usual. He was sure he was bred now even before the results came back – finally an active little Alpha littermate to chase after Hans or else Hannibal’s first sweet dreamy omega cub. Or twins. He was due a set now that the other two Alphas had one each (albeit by adoption).

“I guess we know how you feel about it,” Will interrupted his thoughts although his indignation was mostly for show. “If it is twins, you owe me big time.”

“I already do,” Hannibal said kissing the corner of his jaw. “I feel a staggering amount of obligation.” Will refused to be distracted and kept his eyes fixed on the little blue line.

The omega’s sigh of relief surprised both of them when a second line appeared completing the cross.

Hannibal felt his heart leap in his chest. No matter how many times his virility was confirmed it always made him feel singularly at one with the universe and his place in it. And he had a sense that the cubs that Will would carry for him were going to be truly extraordinary. He was so elated and grateful to be on his way with him finally.

Will was smiling too and kissing him fervently, careful to set the test down without getting his hands dirty.

“That’s my good pup,” Hannibal said rolling them around until he was lying over the omega grinning up at him. He was hard again, could feel Will slicking up for him. The naughty little pup was fingering around the buttons on his fly, not sure if he was allowed to open them or not. Hannibal gave a huff and scented at his neck a little longer. He did smell something different, he just couldn’t exactly separate it out from all the other amazing scents that made up Will on his own.

And then there was a pounding at the door and Hans shouting for Uncle Will that they’d caught another fish. So much for naptime.

He told Will to stay in bed in case he got sick again, cracked open the door and knelt down to tell Hansel to go get Daddy to help him. He felt a bit guilty about it, since he would have preferred to let his other mate rest awhile longer but the alternative was a greater compromise to Will’s health or walking out in front of the cubs with a raging hard-on.

He shut the door and breathed heavily, willing his cock to be still for now. “Get some rest,” he told Will a few minutes later before heading back out onto the deck. “You’re going to need it.”

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It was another bass, a little smaller than the first one but friskier. Randall reeled it in, bleary-eyed, his hair still mussed up and wearing someone else’s trousers which were too long, sagging around his slim hips, and stuck out under his bare feet.

The Alpha dispatched and bled this one as well, gutted them and then put them both on ice. They barely fit in the coolers but Hannibal was able to twist them just so without having to chop them up first.

“Where’s Uncle Will?” Hans asked once everything was stowed away and they were packing up the rest of the gear for the day.

“He’s having a rest,” Hannibal said simply, conscious that Randall was listening to them from the corner of the deck as he broke down the rods.

“Is he sick?” The cub was sniffing around a little but didn’t seem certain.

“No. In fact it’s good news. You’re going to be a big brother again.”

“Is Daddy bred?” Hannibal tried not to wince at the innocent hopeful question. He could feel Randall silently bristling from across the deck.

“No, Uncle Will.”

“Doesn’t that make me a big cousin?” They’d been doing family trees at pre-school and Hans was clearly eager to wheel out his new vocabulary.

“In part. It’s Papa’s cub with Uncle Will so it will be your brother or sister because you have the same Papa and your cousin because your Daddy and Uncle Will are brothers.”

“Oh,” Hans said, seemingly satisfied and then racing off tell Robbie and Abigail all the news.

Randall closed the tackle box and then came over to give him a hug and mumble “Congratulations” into his collar.

“My apologies for waking you,” Hannibal said, stroking his back and kissing his temple. “Will was seasick and needed to lie down and I’m afraid I had to use you as a distraction for the cub.”

“That’s OK,” Randall said a little flatly. “That’s good news about Will anyway.”

“You’re not upset?” Hannibal cupped his chin with both hands and looked directly into his mate’s eyes.

Randall gave a little shrug and bit his bottom lip before finally saying, “No. He’s my brother and I knew you were mated so it’s not like it wasn’t going to happen eventually anyway.”

Hannibal gave him another kiss and stroked the back of his head, pulling him into a tighter hug. “I meant what I said earlier. And our family getting a little bigger doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

Randall gave a faint little sniff and a nod and then pulled away to finish packing up.

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On the way back they stopped to pull up some more crab pots on the other side of the bay. Still no crabs but the second one was completely encrusted with grey green molluscs. Abigail was going to throw it back as broken but Hannibal stopped her, explaining that they were actually live oysters and perfectly edible. He packed them away on ice while Will sped them back to the boatyard.

It was after dark by the time they got there and they had a tense half an hour or so docking the yacht and unloading its precious cargo onto the RV. Hannibal knew he’d made a promise and he didn’t intend to break it but all he wanted to do in this moment was whisk Will away to a secure cave somewhere and guard the entrance until the cub(s) came. For all his good

intentions, he wasn't sure that he was psychologically capable of watching Will throwing himself into dangerous situations now that he knew he was bred.

They'd cleared and secured the boatyard ages ago and Price and Zeller had both gone over it again with a fine-toothed comb just after they arrived, but Hannibal couldn't help being hypervigilant with his cubs and omegas so exposed.

Thankfully, they got everything loaded up without incident and drove the seven or eight blocks back to the safety of the compound. The exhausted cubs had conked out on the bunks as soon as they were set down and Hannibal sat in the bench seat with an omega resting under each of his arms. They were both a little tired and quiet as well, but Randall had congratulated his brother warmly and sincerely when he had come up from his nap and that seemed to be the end of any nascent tension between them.

When they were home, Abigail carried the cubs up to bed and Hannibal led the omegas into the dining room, telling them to kneel down in their usual spots for dinner.

He was keen to try the oysters, although he suspected Randall and possibly Will as well would balk. He'd never been able to get either of them to appreciate escargot. He threw together a simple rice noodle salad with some sashimi slices and a little pigeon breast in case they didn't want the oysters, shucked a dozen of the shellfish and seasoned them on a platter of ice, and carried everything out to the dining room.

It was unusual to have a meal to themselves these days and Hannibal was looking forward to it (and to Randall's fifth and final wish a little later once he had Will settled in for the night).

But there was the little Gideon omega, Jonah, limping into the dining room looking lost. When he noticed Hannibal, a little wave of fear seemed to pass over his face before settling into a practiced smile. He came closer, tapping his hand against the backs of the chairs when he thought he might lose his balance.

"Hello, Jonah," Hannibal said, slightly ruffled by the intrusion but not wanting to be rude-conscious that both of the omegas on either side of his legs were bristling up a little. "Were you looking for someone or did you want to join us?"

The omega knelt down in a standard, if slightly formal greeting, directly in front of Hannibal. As he came up, though, he leaned forward to kiss the Alpha directly on the crotch.

Hannibal leapt to his feet, genuinely surprised, and the three omegas were not far behind him.

Before the flustered Alpha could regain any sense of composure, Randall let out a rumble like a panther with a trapped leg, snarled, "You can fuck right off as well," and punched the little omega in the face so hard he fell backwards into an equally startled Will knocking them both to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Research! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avaSdC0QOUM

# Salvation

The little omega curled up immediately into a ball on the floor and started squealing and distress crying like a much younger cub. Will knelt to try to check on him and Hannibal's instincts were screaming at him to do the same but Randall paced a few steps back and forth and then gave a deep rumbling snarl, crouching a little like he was about to attack again.

"Randall!"

Instead of backing down, the pup turned his growl on Hannibal instead. He was unrecognising and unrecognisable – almost manic with rage. After a brief second of shock, the Alpha reasserted his dominance, grabbing Randall by the scruff of the neck and dragging him out of the dining room. "Go up to your room and wait for me," Hannibal ordered using his voice and then shut the door before his startled mate could reply.

Will had gotten Jonah to sit up a little but blood was streaming from his obviously broken nose. He was still distress crying and, in desperation to make it stop, Hannibal lifted him up and started shushing him and rubbing his back like one of his own cubs while he carried him down to the medical bay.

It was awkward holding him like this after what had just happened but Hannibal wasn't sure what else to do. And unfortunately, they ran into Jeremiah and Dolores in the central hall of the basement.

"What the fuck did you do to him?" his brother asked blocking their way while trying to get a closer look.

"Just let us through," Will told him, somehow finding the right balance of sympathetic and dismissive in his tone to make the young Alpha listen. "We're taking him to the medical bay."

The two Alpha Gideons followed close on their heels trying to ask Jonah what happened but the little omega was still crying too hard. He kept bawling all the way through Hannibal setting him on the table in the medical bay, gently probing either side of his nose for tender spots and then packing his nostrils with gauze and taping a splint on either side of it.

"Could you get some ice please, Will?" Hannibal asked and, thankfully, the omega sprinted off to the kitchen to find some at once, not wanting to miss anything. Meanwhile Jeremiah and Dolores were still eyeing him suspiciously.

"What happened, baby?" Dolores asked when Jonah's sobbing had finally quieted enough for him to catch his breath.

"I'b sorry," he told them all and then peeked nervously up at Hannibal. "Did I do id wrong?"

"Do what wrong, sweetheart?" his sister was asking reaching out to pet the back of his head.

He tried to say something that came out as "Gabugig."

The three Alpha's looked at each other mystified but then Will was back with the ice and while he applied it gently to Jonah's nose, Hannibal got some paper and pens out of one of the drawers.

"Why don't you try writing it down buddy?" Jeremiah asked, half-snatching the paper and pens from Hannibal so he could be the one to hand them to his brother.

Jonah could barely see what he was writing around the tea towel and ice packed against half his face but he managed to scribble the word "communion" on the paper.

"What's that?" Will asked but all of the Alphas shrugged in confusion.

"Is that what he told you to do?" Dolores indicated Hannibal but the omega shook his head no wincing.

"What did he do?" Jeremiah demanded as Jonah shrank back even more.

"He walked over and touched my penis," Hannibal answered for the omega mildly. "I certainly didn't ask him to."

While Jeremiah gaped like a stunned mullet, his sister gently but urgently asked if it was true and what the omega had been thinking.

"I'b suggobd bo," Jonah stammered keeping one eye on his brother as if expecting his head could explode. He sounded uncertain though even in the middle of his protest.

"What?" Jeremiah shouted but then looked apologetic for snapping at him when Jonah started tearing up again.

"Aren't I supposed to?" Jonah wrote. He looked genuinely mystified.

"Who told you you're supposed to do that?" Will pressed.

"Mr. Verger," the little omega added to the paper and then winced when both of his siblings groaned in unison.

Hannibal felt a sick clenching in the pit of his stomach. He'd heard rumours about the Vergers but had never been interested enough to deliberately cross their paths. They were well-known but rarely seen in Baltimore society, at least not in the old money/performing arts circles that Hannibal frequented. Mostly it was innuendos at intermissions or a veiled remark in a side conversation at one of his dinner parties. The son had had some kind of incident at a charity summer camp which the family had hushed up furiously.

"I'm going to kill that fucker with my bare hands," Jeremiah stormed.

"What did Mr. Verger tell you?" Hannibal focused on the omega seeing he was getting upset by the others' displays of anger.

Shaking a little, Jonah scribbled around his original answer: "When there are just omegas they have to greet the Prime Alpha with communion. Otherwise we can't be saved."

“He told you to touch him like that. Like you touched me?”

Hesitant now and eyeing his brother, Jonah gave a little nod. Now Jeremiah and Dolores were both snarling and looking for something to smash.

“Did he tell you to do anything else?” Will asked. “I mean to touch him anywhere else or for him to touch you?”

Jonah looked confused but then slowly shook his head no.

“We kept to our own cabin most of the time,” Dolores confirmed. “Dad didn’t want any of us up near the main house unless one of the guards directly ordered us to go there.”

Jonah was blushing even deeper, more tears starting to pool on his long eyelashes.

Tilting the omega’s chin up a little to catch his eyes, Hannibal told him, “I want you to listen very carefully, Jonah. Are you listening?” The omega winced and gave a frightened little nod.

“That’s not how we do things in my pack. Mr. Verger shouldn’t have taught you that. You don’t touch Alphas like that unless you’re mated and they ask you to. Do you understand?”

The poor little cub turned bright red and big fat tears started rolling down his cheeks but he gave a little nod.

“Nobody’s angry with you,” Will added quickly giving him a reassuring rub to the shoulder. “You didn’t know any better.”

“Rangah’z bad...”

“Randall will get over it. I’m sorry he reacted like that. We were all just surprised. Why don’t you take Jonah back to his room to rest up a little?” Hannibal told his mate before the conversation could turn into more specifics in front of the already fuming Gideons.

“Are you hungry? Is that what you were looking for earlier?” Will asked but Jonah shook his head no and shrugged. Hannibal gave him a gentle pat on the back of the head as he climbed down from the table and then obediently followed Will out of the room.

As soon as they were out of hearing range, both Gideon Alphas exploded.

“I’m going to hunt that child molesting fuck down and skin him,” Dolores snapped looking around for some kind of weapon.

“No more of this birthday bullshit,” Jeremiah added lifting his hands up with the palms spread wide and flat like he was banging them down on an imaginary table. “If you’re not going to help us, we’re going on our own tonight.”

“I understand how you feel,” Hannibal told them taking each of them by the shoulder firmly. He shared their outrage on behalf of the naïve and defenceless cub but not their youthful impetuousness. “I’m happy to help you however I can. But you said before they have fifteen or twenty guards at their compound. If the two of you just storm in guns blazing, you’ll never

get close enough to Mason to see him let alone finish him. What good would it do your little brother to lose his siblings as well as his sire?"

"Fuck this!" Jeremiah howled kicking one of the metal cabinet doors until it dented.

"I'm afraid I must insist that you stop that and calm yourself." Hannibal used his voice and stared down the younger Alphas until they both looked at the floor and went quiet and still.

"Listen to me, both of you. Mason is a menace. We won't be completely safe here until he is dealt with. So tomorrow morning when we're rested and properly equipped, we will go and scout out his compound and come up with a plan to neutralise him that will actually work. I promise you that we will keep your brother safe and that he will never experience here anything like what he experienced with the Vergers. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alpha," they responded one after the other, reluctantly falling into line.

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It was a very tired Alpha who climbed back up the stairs, wrapped up a third of the dinner still sitting on the table and stuck it in refrigerator leaving a note for Will to help himself to it later. He gulped down as many of the oysters as he could stomach, stuck the rest in the freezer, and then headed back up to the bedroom with the last two thirds of their interrupted dinner.

He was immediately annoyed to find that Randall wasn't on the bed or sitting by the fireplace where he would normally be when he was sent to his room – what was it with his pups and their constitutional inability to stay put where they were told?

He could smell that he had been in here recently though.

The Alpha set the plate on the table and sniffed around a bit more. He finally found his mate curled up at the bottom of the bathtub wearing Hannibal's pyjamas with the sable coat from earlier thrown over him. He'd obviously been crying but had managed to self-soothe to the deep steadying breaths phase. He was extremely pale though and his eyes looked glassy when he opened them to look up.

"I'm really sorry," he said miserably.

Hannibal lifted him out without a response sitting on the edge of the tub with the pup curled up in his lap. His raised his hand up to examine the cuts on his knuckles, then filled the sink with warm water to wash them out.

When he was satisfied the scratches were clean, he wrapped the pup's hand with white gauze and then used a facecloth to wash his cheeks.

"Can I change my fifth wish?" Randall croaked as Hannibal finished.

"Of course you can," the Alpha told him kissing the back of his hand and then setting it in his mate's lap.

“I don’t want to apologise to Jonah. I just can’t. I just want to go to bed and wake up and none of this ever happened and I never have to speak to him again. Can I do that?”

“I don’t think that’s going to solve the problem pup.”

“But can I anyway?”

Hannibal considered it for a few seconds. It wasn’t clear cut. He hated having to punish his mate after going through so much effort to give him a perfect day. He understood that Randall hadn’t been fully lucid when he was being aggressive and defiant. He was obviously already beating himself up over it. Nothing Hannibal did to punish him was going to increase his awareness that what he’d done was wrong. But if he simply ignored it, was that the best thing for his mate in the long run? Would the feelings fester or would the behaviour be reinforced?

Finally he said, “Will you accept a condition?”

“What?”

“I want you to start meeting with Dr Du Maurier again.” Randall started to protest but Hannibal cut him off with a squeeze to his good hand. “And I don’t mean once a month I have to drag you over there and you spend the whole session twiddling your thumbs and watching the clock. You go yourself twice a week and take it seriously. It’s obvious that these outbursts are as upsetting to you as they are to everyone else.”

Hannibal paused and shifted Randall onto his feet so he could face him more directly. The pup was looking submissively at the ground but Hannibal tilted his chin up to look at him directly. Whatever had gotten into him before, it seemed to have fled completely now. “It is absolutely unacceptable to show your temper to your Alpha like that. Do you understand?”

Randall started sniffling and nodded but then rushed to add “Yes, Alpha” before Hannibal could correct him.

“You’re allowed to feel jealous and angry and upset or however else you feel. You’re not allowed to just attack people or threaten them and you’re certainly not allowed to take it out on anyone else who happens to be in the room. Do I need to worry about what would happen next time if it was one of the cubs instead of stranger?”

Randall was starting to cry and choke on his breaths again but he composed himself enough to shake his head no slowly. “I wouldn’t. I promise.”

“It’s not a question of promising if you’re not capable of controlling yourself,” Hannibal told him bluntly. “What you can promise me is that you’re going to work seriously on getting that control.”

“I will... I hate this.”

“Okay, good pup,” Hannibal told him kissing his temple. “Do you still need a spanking to help you settle?”

“No, Sir, I’m good,” Randall told him shifting around a little and looking embarrassed.

“You’re sure?”

His mate nodded fervently. Hannibal wasn’t completely convinced but he had promised him one last birthday indulgence. And they were both exhausted – a dangerous state to be in for dealing out discipline. If Randall did still need a spanking tomorrow morning, history suggested he wouldn’t be subtle about showing it. So instead, the Alpha lifted him up and carried his mate back to the other room to feed him and put him to bed.

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The next day found Abigail, Hannibal, Jeremiah, and Dolores trekking through Susquehanna State Park. Jack had also volunteered to come along, mostly as an excuse to get out on scouting missions again. Abigail was relieved that he seemed to be coming to the end of his period of deepest grieving. She’d missed his company on scavenging trips and they needed every helping hand they could get, even with their little group expanding a little now. He was guarding the car because of his bad back but they had walkie talkies with GPS to stay in contact in case they ran into any trouble.

Against Abigail’s better judgement the two Gideons had also been given guns when they insisted. If worse came to worst though, she was pretty sure she could take down both of them by herself. They were technically adult Alphas but didn’t have any real training that she could see. Despite everything that had happened since the beginning of the epidemic, they still seemed like slightly soft prep school kids. Abigail felt like she was thirty years older than them instead of five or six.

As soon as Dolores described the Verger compound, Abigail had been able to locate it on the map for them. Her father sometimes worked at the rangers’ office at Susquehanna State Park and they’d gone hunting together there a lot. She knew all the trails like the back of her hand even now that they were getting a little overgrown.

She even remembered the random black steel security fence which seemed to run through the middle of nowhere and her father mentioning it as the boundary with some rich guy’s estate.

Now she could see that the deer had completely taken over this part of the forest. A number of the trees had half the bark stripped off their trunks. They did still have a healthy fear of humans though. Someone was still hunting out here at least part of the time.

She spotted an absolutely gorgeous 20-point buck but it was out of range for her bow, they couldn’t risk the noise from a rifle shot attracting attention, and they didn’t have time to haul it all the way back to the hybrid, assuming they’d even remembered to bring cord to strap it to the roof. Still, it was eating away at her insides to just walk away from it.

The biggest trophy antler mounts at her father’s cabin had been 16-points. What would he be doing if he was still alive today? He’d be in hunter’s paradise, she decided. Up to his neck in glue, pelts and velvet. How would he even keep up with honouring every part of them when there was so much in abundance? He’d hardly be done with one before the next one would be nibbling at the fringe of his kitchen garden.

And he'd adore having so many grandkids. He'd make them all moccasins like the ones he used to give her every year for her birthday – so soft and well-worked they needed no breaking in at all. Robbie, Marty and Danny all had their sire's easy, self-confident, openly affectionate nature. Jake was the one that reminded her of her father – quiet and a little serious but passionately enthusiastic about the things that were dear to him. He's the one that would hold back a little from the group clinging to the back of her leg and wanting to whisper secrets directly in her ear, just for her. She could easily imagine the two of them, Jake and her father, having long philosophical discussions out on the porch while they ground bones in a mortar.

They were getting closer to the fence now, though, so it was time to stop wool-gathering and being morbid. What was done was done. Her father didn't get to enjoy the world he had inadvertently created so Abigail was going to get the most out of it she could on his behalf.

According to Jeremiah, there were six full-time security guards at the Verger compound, four of whom had been professional bodyguards for Mason since before the plague and were totally loyal to him. The other two were sons of one of the original guards. They had been training Jeremiah to be the seventh. They mostly patrolled by car and stuck to the roads, relying on motion detectors and the security cameras around the fence perimeter to pick up any intruders. According to Jeremiah the coverage wasn't complete and he knew where some gaps had been but he couldn't guarantee they hadn't been addressed after the Gideons escaped.

All the Verger fields and pastures were to the south of the villa so the security detail tended to focus on the main road in, guarding the farmers, and any approaches from the river rather than the forested area to the north. Many of the people working on the farm had been captured and essentially enslaved. Jeremiah was convinced that at least five or six of them could be easily convinced to fight with them if they thought there was a reasonable chance they and their families could get away. That narrowed the odds considerably.

When they got to the fence they could see that Mason had erected a long row of wooden crosses just inside of it and topped each of them with a charred boar's skull, tusks pointing outwards in silent warning. Even the birds seemed to have gone quieter in this part of the forest.

Undaunted, Hannibal started cutting through some of the bars using an angle grinder – just enough at the bottom so that they could bend them and slip under the fence without it being immediately obvious from a distance that there was a gap. They could cover it with piles of leaves when they left to disguise it further.

There was a little rise between two tree trunks where a third tree had fallen on the ground between them. Abigail waited there with the Gideons, her rifle at the ready in case the noise attracted any unwanted attention.

In the pause before Hannibal moved on to the last bar, suddenly she could hear a car engine, tires crackling through the fallen leaves, twigs and branches snapping. Just before the car came into view, Hannibal scrambled up the bank and crouched behind the trunk with the rest of them.

“Shit, sorry,” Jeremiah whispered at them. “They must have patched this bit. I still don’t see where they’ve put any of the cameras though.”

Fortunately, it was just one black SUV speeding through the forest directly towards them. Then their hearts sank when a second black SUV came into view behind it. Before they could quite reach the fence, however, the second SUV ploughed into the first one driving it into a tree.

Three stout men jumped out of the second SUV. They were all wearing long overcoats and black fedoras. One was clearly an Alpha. Jeremiah whispered that his name was Carlo, the head of the security team. The other two were his beta half-brother and nephew, Matteo and Tommaso.

They strode over to the first SUV, which was totalled and had steam pouring out from under the hood. Matteo yanked open the driver’s side door and then dragged a semi-conscious and heavily bred omega woman out of the driver’s seat by the hair.

“Ciao Principessa,” Carlo was saying as his nephew pulled the second car back and the three of them tried to lift the omega up into the back seat.

Before Abigail realised what was happening, Dolores had jumped from the top of the fallen trunk to the top of the fence and was trying scramble over it. Her brother cursed and jumped after her.

The three guards heard the clanging noise against the fence, dropped the omega to the ground and started shooting at the Gideons. One of them plugged Jeremiah in the torso and now he was more hanging off the fence than trying to climb it. Dolores was over and on the far side, running towards the cars, shooting wildly mostly at the windshields. Hannibal started crawling under the fence through the hole he’d made earlier.

Shit, I guess this is what we’re doing now, Abigail sighed as she took aim. The guards were racing for cover behind the open car doors. She got the nephew in the upper leg, the uncle in his good shoulder. The Alpha shot Dolores in the leg and she stumbled to the ground but before he could finish her, Hannibal was behind him choking him into unconsciousness. Meanwhile somehow the omega had gotten ahold of the gun that the brother dropped and was training it on him and the nephew.

Abigail raced down to the fence now, crawled under and ran to the car. Luckily, there were bungy cords in both trunks and they used them to secure the three guards to the trees. Hannibal gave her the angle grinder and told her to cut down a section of the fence by the hinges while he tended to the Gideons and the new omega.

“What should we do with them?” she asked Hannibal once she was done and everyone else was loaded up in the SUV.

“I think we leave them for now,” Hannibal told her, taking the power tool from her. “There’s no room in the car to take them with us and it would be a shame to leave them here to rot when they could be useful later.”

Abigail nodded. They needed to honour every part of them and here there was no time. They'd need to ditch the SUV as soon as they got back to the hybrid in case Mason had some way to trace it. And there was no way they were getting nine, or even seven, people back home in the hybrid.

Before they left, however, she watched Hannibal kneel with the angle grinder beside each of the guards in turn and sever the first two fingers on each hand, catching them in a little plastic baggie to bring with them. The two that were still conscious screamed frantically into the duct tape covering their mouths.

"Un'altra volta forse, amici," Hannibal told them as he climbed into the SUV and drove them away over the collapsed section of the gate.

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The delivery went well, given how quickly Reba had dilated. The cub was crowning only four hours after the omega's water broke and a few minutes after that Alana was cleaning up and placing a little Alpha girl into the omega's arms. Reba latched on to her and scented her eagerly – everything going as it was intended to.

The omega decided to name her Pru after her Alpha dam, the first of her five cubs that she got to name herself. Her Alpha had insisted on naming the first three girls after his mother and two spinster aunts even though it sounded like all three of them had made his childhood a misery.

Reba had been a little reluctant to go with Alana at all, saying she preferred to wait until Jack got back, but when it was obvious that her labor would be precipitous, Alana insisted on loading her into a wheelchair and hustling her down to the medical bay. Fortunately, she hadn't had to drug or restrain her. That left Will trying to watch a pack of distraught and still very wary cubs on his own, but he was always cheerful and happy to help out these days. Still, she'd have to find a way to make it up to him later.

Reba was warming up to her now, though, realising that Alana was a sympathetic ear. This was the beta's favorite part of her job, watching new little ones opening their eyes on the world for the first time and starting that first little thread of a bond with their parents.

They were so pure and innocent and ready to love whole-heartedly the first thing they set eyes on. Julian was a little more than a month old but still had that expression sometimes when he woke up from a nap. "What new amazing thing are you going to show me now?"

She wasn't in a rush for her own number four but she wasn't in a hurry to close this chapter of her life for good either no matter what she said at 3 am when she was up to her neck in spit-up and dirty diapers.

Alana's reverie was disturbed, however, when she heard alarmed voices in the hallway.

A few seconds later, half a dozen people crashed through the doors at once all of them soaked in blood. It took a while to figure out who was injured or not and how seriously and to shift the beds around to start working on them.

Reba pulled herself painfully to her feet with the cub curled in one arm and offered up her bed. Jack lifted Jeremiah onto it and then led the omega off back to his house cooing all the way over young Pru.

Jeremiah was obviously the most seriously injured. Pasty at the best of times, now he looked grey and was barely conscious. Hannibal had tried to pack the wound using the first aid kit in the car but it looked like there was serious internal haemorrhaging and he would need surgery as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, Hannibal was stitching up Dolores' leg and reassuring a third person who Alana couldn't quite see out of the corner of her eye.

"He's still alive?" Dolores was asking.

"Yes," Alana said over her shoulder at the same time that the other person answered the same.

"Sorry," the Alpha clarified. "I was asking about my Dad."

"Abel is the only doctor we have." It was a woman, her voice confident, cultured, with the very faintest Southern twang. "Mason is keeping him alive for my delivery."

Dolores sagged a little in relief and even Jeremiah, who had seemed oblivious to Alana's earlier probing, seemed to smile faintly at the good news. When she had him stabilised enough to risk a few seconds to assess the last patient, Alana turned to see a cherub-faced young omega, sixteen or seventeen at the most. She was clutching a broken left arm over her heavily swollen belly but reached out her right to shake.

"Margot Verger," she said as Alana shook her hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Alana Bloom," she replied as she checked over the multiple small lacerations and bruises on Margot's neck, her upper chest and arms, anything to avoid looking directly into those huge grey eyes or staring at her bright red lips.

Alana hooked her up to the fetal heart monitor and there were no signs of distress to the cub. So the arm was the worst of it.

"It won't affect my tennis game, will it?" Margot asked raising one eyebrow and hissing slightly as Alana slowly released her.

"We'll have you back on the court in no time," Alana reassured her with a quick smile.

She found herself reluctant to move away but Hannibal could set the arm while she scrubbed up for Jeremiah's surgery. He was obviously in a much more perilous condition.

Alana risked one look back though as she rinsed her hands and sighed quietly to herself. This was going to make her life a lot more complicated.

# Presentation

Chapter Notes

> This is mostly fluffy holiday feels that don't really advance the plot much. The last section is gratuitous Daddy kink with Abigail which you can totally skip if that's not what you're into.
>
> Next week: plot

“Can I help with anything?” Randall asked. He’d overslept, forgotten what day it was, and was just looking for a snack but Hannibal had already spotted him. Backing slowly out of the kitchen was no longer a viable option.

“Ah, Randall,” the Alpha replied steering him towards a chair next to Will set up at the rolling counter extension. His hands were covered in flour up to the rolls of his sleeves so he waved and pointed rather than touching. “Can you help your brother finish the dumplings?”

There was some kind of ground mushroom-cheese filling in a huge bowl at the center of the table and Will was scooping portions out with a melon baller and folding them into round dumpling cases. He had a big pile of finished ones next to him but still seemed to have hundreds left to go. As Randall sat, his brother handed him a teaspoon with a look that said “Welcome to hell.”

All four ovens were blazing, all six burners were fired up, every single surface was covered in sheet pans or roasting pans full of something either about to go in or just out of the oven. And they weren’t even eating dinner for another six hours.

Hannibal was insisting on cooking a twelve-course Christmas Eve dinner for all thirty-four of them – more really because he was swapping out some menu items for the younger cubs and the vegetarians. Randall couldn’t really grumble about being put on dumpling duty when the Alpha had been working non-stop all week and was doing 90% of the cooking and decorating and planning himself.

This was the first Christmas they were all really together and the cubs were getting old enough to remember, so it was going to be the most amazing holiday anybody had ever had or Hannibal would die trying. Which meant both his mates were stuck doing high protocol for the meal. On the one hand at least all that training hadn’t gone to waste, but on the other hand Randall would have preferred to just relax and enjoy himself instead of prancing around like a show pony.

The kitchen did smell epic though. It immediately reminded him of when they were little and Hannibal tried to teach them knife skills while they goofed around and tested his patience.

The Alpha disappeared for a moment, ducking into another room and Will leaned over to whisper, “Run, I’ll cover you.”

Randall snorted down a laugh but before he could respond Hannibal was back carrying one of the low tables from the playroom and trailing half a dozen of the older cubs who had been promised an opportunity to decorate sugar cookies. He set down a cooled rack in the middle of the table surrounded by half a dozen piping bags with different colors of frosting and a tray full of ramekins with different decorative toppings.

The cubs crowded around picking out which shape they wanted, announcing loudly to each other their creative visions. Randall felt a little spark of pride watching Hans helping the smaller ones. He didn’t have to be a mind reader to see Will was watching them and imagining his own little cub jostling in there in a few years.

Hannibal pulled the chestnuts off the burners and smiled at Will like he could tell what he was thinking too. They were both so sappy these days. Randall knew they weren’t rubbing his nose in it deliberately but he still wanted to gag.

The Alpha stuck a massive covered stock pot on the empty burner and then pulled a misting bottle out of the cabinet without missing a beat. He didn’t even use timers. Somehow his brain was wired to keep track of the sub-stages of twenty different tasks running all at the same time.

Hannibal opened another low cabinet, the one closest to them, pulled back the cheesecloth covering and spritzed the fruitcake with brandy, a twice weekly ritual that had been going on for the better part of two months and which Randall referred to mentally as “feeding the beast”.

It had to be earth-shatteringly tasty to be worth all that effort but Hannibal insisted that it would be.

When the beast was tucked back safely in its cabinet, Hannibal peeled the chestnuts and set small bowls of them out for both the cubs and his mates. He stopped behind Randall and Will to take a deep breath before setting theirs down.

“These smell amazing,” Will said half rising to kiss Hannibal on the lips. “Like the market on the Rio Tera San Leonardo in Venice.”

The Alpha returned his kiss, stroking Randall on the back of the head so he wouldn’t be left out. Instead, he found his hackles rising slightly and hoped Hannibal couldn’t tell. Will used to be embarrassed about the psychic stuff but now he was making any excuse to show it off.

“Don’t they,” Hannibal said as he broke away from Will reluctantly. “I almost prefer the scent to the taste itself. I’m sorry I never had a chance to share the real thing with you both.”

The Alpha leaned in a little closer to whisper, “Feel free to take a break if you need one, Will. We can’t have you overtaxing yourself.”

Randall wasn't going to take it personally that there was no similar concern about him overtaxing himself. That would just be stupid. Hannibal had been absurdly overprotective and solicitous about him too when he was bred. What was the little saying Dr Du Maurier kept giving him to repeat? Something about caring not being a zero-something game. What was the point of stupid mantras you couldn't remember when you needed to?

Then Hans marched up to show them his masterpiece – a reindeer covered in blobs of lime green frosting and sparkling sugar crystals.

"It broke," he said woefully, holding up the detached antlers as evidence before popping them in his mouth. "I need another one Papa."

"That's beautiful darling," his sire told him leaning down to give him a kiss. "Why don't you finish eating that one and then you can make one for Daddy and Uncle Will? You need to save some room in there for all the good things to come."

He tickled the cub's belly and then went back to work chopping up the remaining chestnuts. Hans raced over to get started on his next masterwork, a pink snowman with toasted almonds and white star-shaped sprinkles which he handed to Will.

"Don't I get one?" Randall asked with fake indignation.

"Uncle Will needs the vitamins," the cub informed him doing such a perfect impression of his sire's mother henning they both had to laugh.

Another thing not to take personally. Did he do anything else these days? It didn't seem like it.

He knew he was never going to win any parent of the year awards, but he did try as hard as he could at least most of the time. Why was it so easy for Will to build rapport with all the cubs when Randall just felt clunky and useless and couldn't think of anything good to say to them? When Will was little he'd been able to come up with games and things to entertain him but now he found it almost impossible to get back into that playful mindset again. It's like the gap between him and Hans was so much greater and he didn't know how to span it anymore to meet him at his level.

They'd finished the dumplings and Randall could almost taste freedom but as soon as the first bowl of stuffing was empty, Hannibal replaced it with a second topped up with a chestnut cheese filling for the ravioli.

It went a lot faster this time though. Hannibal put on some classical music – something Russian with a lot of sleighbells in it. As each of the cubs finished their cookies, he would send them off to the playroom to get their advent calendars so they could open up their last drawer in front of everyone.

Randall tried to hide his wince behind the bowl of stuffing. He'd made a calendar for each of the cubs that was old enough to understand the concept, up to his neck for a week gluing and tacking little wood boxes together and then painting all of them and creating a little cabinet for each of them with wood decorations on top reflecting each of the cubs' personalities and

interests. Then Hannibal painted all the decorations and wrote names and numbers on them. They'd come out awesome – better than anything he'd thought he would be able to make - but they hadn't really been designed for three- and four-year olds to race around jostling them. He should have anticipated that and used stronger wood in the first place.

At Will's first Council meeting they'd decided that the Alphas were in charge of filling the calendars for the cubs in their household. Hannibal had mostly done chocolate truffles molded or decorated for each cub to reflect things they loved or secret jokes between them. He also wrote out some atrocious jokes and puns for the older ones who could read them and drew funny little illustrations for the others.

Bedelia had assembled a lot of little felt finger puppets and knitted toys that looked like different animals for her son Christopher and Franklyn's twins. Jack had been slightly at a loss what to do for Reba's two oldest girls but Will lent him a book on origami and helped him fold a number of little figures. Jack also made them friendship bracelets and little folded treasure maps to encourage them to explore more of the compound. They still tended to cling to their mother and hadn't gone much further than Jack's house. Randall saw them so rarely he still wasn't 100% sure which name belonged to which of them.

In the end though, the Alphas coordinated so that each cub got a mix of different types of presents from each of them. And thankfully nothing broke in transit although Randall had to dive a couple times for some last second saves.

They were almost done with the ravioli and the last of the calendars had been opened when there was a hearty rapping at the kitchen doors and a "ho, ho, ho" could be heard from the garden. All the cubs squealed and raced over to the door, jumping up and down as Jack burst in in a Santa costume followed by Reba, Price and Zeller dressed as elves. Price had his laziest and most accommodating cat, a tortoiseshell Persian called Jigsaw, dressed up like an elf as well. She was tucked up under one arm and just yawned at them.

Will and Randall grinned at each other and Will gave him a sudden hug around the chest like he used to do when he was a toddler. Randall was so surprised he almost dropped his spoon.

"Merry Christmas," Jack bellowed and all the cubs screamed it back at him lit up with delight.

"My elves told me there's some little boys and girls here who have some very important letters for me."

"We do, we do," they shouted and then dragged Santa to the rocking chair in the playroom where they crowded around to hand over their lists and whisper any last minute items they'd forgotten.

Seizing the excuse to escape from the kitchen, Randall and Will wrapped up the discarded calendars in dishtowels and then carried them upstairs to store safely away for next year. Then they raced down to catch the end of Jack's act.

Hannibal pulled him aside for a moment at the bottom of the stairs, signalling for Will to go on ahead to the playroom.

“Are you feeling alright?” the Alpha asked feeling his forehead which, of course, made Randall flush a little. When he was done, he moved on to fixing some stray strands of his hair.

“Yes, everything’s great,” Randall told him mustering up a smile.

“Don’t be nervous about tonight,” Hannibal told him, giving him another hug and rubbing the back of his neck down to between his shoulder blades. “You’ve practiced this a hundred times and I know you’ll do splendidly.”

Or, in other words, don’t fuck it up and embarrass him in front of the other Alphas. Not that Hannibal would actually punish him. He’d just be disappointed again - which in its own way was worse. Randall gave a little gulp and then put on another smile. “I’ll try.”

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Will laughed freely as Jack struggled to stand with cubs clinging to both arms and his legs. He insisted that he had to get back to the North Pole to feed the reindeer but promised to come back later that night to drop off their presents.

Bedelia tried to intervene out of concern for his back by asking who wanted to see the Christmas tree. Tom just pointed at the big paper one on the wall in the playroom and said they could already see it.

That was just the tacky one Will, Peter and Jonah had set up in desperation to come up with day care activities. The cubs killed some time making their own ornaments and arguing about where to put them. The official tree was in the sitting room which Hannibal had kept locked up for the past four days, off limits to any but those with the highest level of security clearance.

Then Dolores started singing a little nonsense song that Will had never heard before and suspected she was making up on the spot even though it sounded traditional. They lyrics went something like:

Some lucky cubs might get to see
A very fancy Christmas tree
And if they’re good they’ll dance with glee
Around the shiny Christmas tree
And when they’re big they’ll still be wee
Standing under our Christmas tree

She was swinging Christopher’s arms up and around while she sang and walking backwards out of the room. All the cubs latched on to her overdramatic tone and started clapping and wandering after her towards the sitting room like the Pied Piper. As everyone else cleared out after them, Will hung back a little watching Jack half collapse back into the rocking chair the stack of letters clutched in one hand.

“I’ve got my work cut out for me,” he told Will with a smile, waving the letters slightly. Anyone who hadn’t lived with him for years would have missed the very faint shadow that

crossed his face, but Will was too well attuned.

“Bella would love all this,” the omega offered.

“What has it been, three months? It still feels like yesterday. Or this morning. I still wake up and think she’s there.”

“She wanted you to be happy though. She’d be so glad you have someone to look after.”

Jack gave a little sniff, disguised by pulling himself up to his feet and dragging the fake beard down under his chin.

“I just don’t want Reba to feel like she’s getting second-hand goods. She deserves better than that after everything she’s been through.”

“She couldn’t do better,” Will told him sincerely. Jack just cleared his throat and looked away.

“We’re not even close to ready for that. Either of us.”

“When you are though,” Will persisted. It’s not that he felt guilty exactly for not keeping his promise to Bella. Or not 100% that. He did really want to see Jack settled and happy again and Reba was perfect for him. She’d keep him with the group too. No way he was going off with her and such young cubs in the RV to live in the wilderness crawling with infected.

“How are you doing, pup? Is Hannibal taking good care of you?”

“Yes,” Will responded blushing despite himself. He was still a little sore from Hannibal taking care of him the night before and felt like Jack could smell it on him.

“Good,” Jack replied kissing his forehead and pointing a finger at his nose. “You come and tell me if he isn’t.”

“I will.”

“I’m serious pup.”

“I know.”

Jack pulled his beard back up and then Santa snuck out through the side garden to avoid being seen. Will rejoined the main group in the sitting room. They were singing carols around the absurdly extravagant and tasteful Christmas tree. The top branches were strung with white lights, crystal snowflakes and icicles and colourful baubles but the lowest branches had fancy personalised ornaments for all of the cubs and everyone else in the pack. Will spotting a couple papier-mâché dogs and brightly colored fish that were for him and smiled.

There were too many stockings to hang over the fireplace so they were strung around the room on any surface that could support them. Alana made them all and had sewn each person’s name across the top. Will’s was hanging off the side of the harpsichord next to Hannibal’s with Randall’s on the other side. A discreet tap to the bottom of the foot told him

they were all empty now but he found himself genuinely excited to find out what they would all be filled with tomorrow morning.

It was starting to get a little bit dark outside now and all the lights on the trees in the garden came on. It looked like a fairy land out there and it was certainly cold enough that they could hope for some snow overnight.

Feeling a little guilty seeing Randall had been set to lighting about a billion candles in the dining room and foyer, Will ventured back into the kitchen to see if there was anything else he could help with.

Hannibal's pace had picked up but everything was still orchestrated like a perfect dance. At first the Alpha objected to his offer and told him he should go back and enjoy himself. Will's expression conveyed how ridiculous he thought that was when Hannibal had been running himself ragged for the past week to make sure everything was perfect.

So he was assigned to stemming and splitting Brussels sprouts, skimming off finished ravioli that had risen to the top of the pot and taking things out of the oven when Hannibal asked him to. Meanwhile the Alpha shucked oysters, deep fried things like a whirlwind, worked on about six different sauces at once, kept an eye on every single rack in the ovens at the same time and arranged things tastefully on a long line of platters.

When Randall came back with Peter in tow, Hannibal started making up demonstration plates for them to copy and repeating the order that everything had to go out in. They were doing French service at the cubs' table with Peter in charge of making sure the central serving dishes stayed full for each course. Alana, Margot and Dolores were supervising the table and would make sure the food was distributed to all the cubs.

Then they would do Russian service at the adults' table with Randall and Will bringing out the pre-assembled dishes except for the crown roast which Hannibal was going to carve at the table. Randall was serving Hannibal and the right side of the table, Reba, Jack and Chilton, and Will was serving Bedelia at the foot and the left side, Zeller, Price and Abigail in that order.

The three omegas looked at each other gulping and hoping at least one of the others had completely absorbed what they needed to do. Hannibal produced written instructions with illustrations as well but they were fifteen pages long. Seeing them getting nervous, Hannibal reassured them that they wouldn't be in trouble if they had to ask him for help at any time. It would have been verboten at a high society dinner party, but this was still technically just a fancy family dinner and everyone understood the omegas were still learning.

Finally, Hannibal made up two large plates and a mug of steaming cider for Will to bring down to Jeremiah. He was still recovering from his surgery, having been in a coma for several weeks, and told them he didn't feel up to sitting at the table for a long meal. He had insisted on making himself useful though by monitoring the security cameras so that everyone else could have the night off. Hannibal, Price and Zeller were also taking turns monitoring the perimeter on their phones as back up but could otherwise relax and enjoy the meal.

Will found the young Alpha studiously attending to the monitors, Jonah sitting next to him to keep him company.

“Anything fishy?” Will asked to announce his arrival.

“Yeah, nothing suspicious about this,” Jeremiah responded playing back a tape of Jack in his Santa outfit creeping down the alley to his house earlier.

Will laughed and set the food and drink on the desk.

“Hannibal says we’re eating in about twenty minutes so we should get dressed and washed up and head up there,” Will told the little omega. The splint was off his nose but he still had some dark circles under his eyes.

“Maybe I should just stay down here,” Jonah started before his brother cut him off. He’d been semi-avoiding them for weeks now like a new cat.

“Forget it. Go up there and have a nice time,” the Alpha ordered. “You can’t hide down here forever.”

“I don’t have anything to wear though and... I don’t know what to do.”

He doesn’t know if he’s supposed to kneel or not and if so for whom, Will realised.

“Don’t worry about it,” Will reassured him. “There’s a seating chart.”

He pulled out his notes to show him. “See, you’re at the cubs’ table. I hope you don’t mind. Alana and Dolores are going to need all the help they can get. Just try to keep Christopher in his chair and Tobey just needs a bottle at some point and you can put him down in the cribs in the playroom if he starts fussing or falling asleep.”

Jonah gave a little smile covering a barely perceptible sigh of relief.

“We’ll find you something to wear too,” Will said grabbing his sleeve and pulling him out into the hall. Jeremiah gave him a warm smile of thanks and then they were off to the storage room which still had chests and chests of Lady Murasaki’s tunics. None of it would remotely fit, but they could probably roll or pin some of them up to look acceptable.

He was at a bit of a loss when they got there though. Hannibal always just picked things out for him and Randall on the rare occasion when they had to look presentable. He assumed, correctly to be fair, that they would be hopeless at it.

Fortunately, Jonah was like a cub in a candy store digging up at least four different layers in coordinated shades of red and lavender including leggings with butterfly appliques and a matching scarf which he rolled up as a headband.

Once he’d picked everything out, Will led him up to his rooms in the attic which had a full length mirror. He got changed into the tunic Hannibal had picked out and taken in for him. It was a very dark forest green with geometric patterns embroidered into it and lots of weird

folding flapping bits at the front. It wasn't exactly his style, but he wasn't embarrassed to be seen in it either.

He used the fixed hand mirror with his fly-tying gear to make sure his hair wasn't shooting off in too many different directions and he didn't have anything in his teeth. Then he went back to collect the other omega.

Jonah looked like he'd stepped straight out of a fashion spread - sticking the whole thing together with safety pins so it looked like it had been tailored for him in the first place. Will wasn't sure where he'd found make-up, certainly not in any of Will's drawers, but he was adding concealer under his eyes to hide the bruises and blending it in.

"Do I look okay?" he asked when he noticed Will.

"You look great," Will reassured him.

"Thanks, you do too..." The little omega trailed off obviously intending to say more and thinking better of it.

"What?"

"It doesn't matter. I just... I think you're supposed to tie these bits." Jonah reached over rearranging the folds of Will's tunic at the front so they lay artistically and then securing everything by latching the different sections together in a baffling order.

"Can I?" Jonah asked when he was done pointing for Will to sit at the desk. When he did, Jonah brought over a little spray bottle of something that Hannibal insisted on keeping up here and a hairbrush and spent a few minutes getting his hair in order.

Standing to look at himself in the full mirror, Will had to admit that the other omega knew what he was doing. He actually looked frighteningly like a grown up. He wouldn't even be completely out of place hanging off Hannibal's arm at a gallery opening.

"Thanks," he told Jonah sincerely and the little omega just ducked his head and smiled at him.

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Hannibal had his six oldest cubs more or less lined up and he went down the line fixing bow ties, tucking in shirts, adjusting collars and cuffs and wiping away the odd smudge with his pocket square. The two that were still nursing had already been fed and put to bed for the night. Alana and Abigail both had buzzers on their phones that would alert them if they started crying into the monitors. He'd been practicing "tea party" manners with the older ones for the past two months and was confident if there was an incident at the cubs' table it wouldn't be his little ones that instigated it.

When Will came in, Hannibal almost burned himself grabbing a handle that was still hot. Not only had the omega managed to put on his somewhat complicated tunic correctly, he'd accessorised with a scarf tied under his waist and actually brushed his hair too. And he had

that glow about him now that he was finally being looked after properly. He beamed at his Alpha and then ducked his head a little shyly as if he was embarrassed for other people to notice. One last thing to train out of him. He shouldn't be hiding his light under a bushel.

Randall looked amazing as well in deep burgundy coloured tunic. Hannibal had given him a bit of extra help but his mate hadn't been as resistant as he usually was to anything he considered too fussy. He was really making the effort and it didn't go unnoticed or unappreciated.

When it was finally time and the cubs had been settled into their seats, Hannibal came back into the kitchen gave them both a quick kiss, put their collars on, gave them one last assurance that they would do fine and then went out to sit at his place at the head of the table.

The omegas all came in together, Randall leading Reba, Will carrying two massive platters of oysters and Peter carrying a big tray for the cubs' table of pépites de poisson and panzerotti.

Peter's outfit was canary yellow, complementing Bedelia's green dress without outshining her. Reba's tunic was beige with dozens of sweeping folds across the front. It wasn't one of Bella's but it was close to something she would have worn and Hannibal suspected Jack had picked it out for her. They all looked amazing, poised and well turned out but Hannibal's mates were clearly superior. He couldn't have been prouder of them.

All the cubs gasped and clapped when they saw them. Peter dropped their platters off at their table and then went to kneel for Bedelia. Some of the cubs (thankfully not Hannibal's) started to reach for the food but Alana whispered for them to wait until Hannibal gave the signal. He shot her a little smile of gratitude which she returned.

When Randall and Reba got to Jack there was an awkward moment when she started to kneel and he told her she didn't have to and she said she didn't mind and he said she shouldn't feel obliged and on and on until finally she sat in the chair next to him instead so it would be easy for him to dish things on to her plate for her.

Meanwhile, Randall took one of the platters from Will and they distributed the first course around the table in the correct order finally coming back to kneel on either side of Hannibal. He rewarded both of them with a pleased squeeze to the back of the neck and then rose to give his address.

"I must confess I'm at a loss for words to express how sincerely grateful I am to have you all around my table here tonight. We've been through so many difficult times together. We've all lost dear friends and loved ones that we would have liked to see sitting with us now. But we are all here and we are greater, stronger, more than we have ever been before. All of our struggles have made us a family. I want to say thank you for everything you've done to bring us all here to this moment together and to share my fervent hope that next year finds us all here again together with an even greater bounty to enjoy."

Hannibal raised his glass in a toast which was met by all the others, inhaled deeply over the bowl of his Bâtard-Montrachet Grand Cru and took a satisfied sip before seating himself again. He graciously pretended not to see the tears in Jack's eyes.

“Please,” he encouraged the others. “Bon appétit.”

“Do you want to try one?” Hannibal leaned down a little to offer oysters to the omegas. He was impressed that they agreed to at least try, although they gulped them down as fast as they could like they were bitter medicine and then made faces at each other under the table when they thought he couldn’t see.

He was seated between Reba and Abigail and they made small talk, mostly about Reba’s job before teaching life skills for the newly blind. Hannibal hadn’t had much of an opportunity to speak with her since she had moved in and was impressed by her adaptability and instinct for survival. She certainly had Jack wrapped around her smallest finger after only a month or two.

When the platters of oysters had emptied, he stroked under the omegas’ ears which was their signal for the next course. Will and Randall both rose gracefully and then walked back to the kitchen.

They were back in very good time with the beignets de crabe, which they’d had to take out of the oven and partially plate. They’d even managed to load up with four plates each at the same time without looking too wobbly coming in. Will and Peter were practically strutting now that they’d relaxed a little.

After the crab came the chestnut ravioli, then beet soup with mushroom dumplings. Those were the easiest courses. All the omegas had to do was make sure the sauce looked intentional and to wipe up any stray droplets after dishing them up.

The most difficult dish was bowls of herring which had been poached and arranged to look like they were eating their own tails. The broth had to be a specific temperature and half a dozen garnishes that could only go on after the broth had to be added including caviar eggs. It took them a little longer to pull it together but the conversation was lively at both tables so nobody noticed.

Chilton was getting a little drunk and Price and Zeller were on a roll but at least everyone was enjoying themselves. Even Jack was relaxed, savouring the food and giving deep belly laughs at Price’s slightly inappropriate story about two of the turtles.

When all the fish had been demolished, Hannibal got up with the omegas to help them bring in the roast and all the trimmings on a trolley.

In the kitchen he gave each of his mates a deep kiss in turn and told them how well they were doing. They were in the home stretch now and looked relieved. The meat, roasted potatoes and carrots, mashed sweet potatoes and brussels sprouts all went out on the trolley at the same time so all they had to do was distribute it. After that it was just pre-plated goat cheese salad and some mulled apple cider and they were off high protocol for the night and could call the whole thing a success.

Hannibal wheeled out the trolley and everyone gasped hungrily even though they were already six courses in. It did look impressive, a whole rib cage upended and perfectly seared. He told them all it was venison, courtesy of Abigail’s forays. Actually it was the nephew

from the Verger compound who somehow still hadn't managed to learn not to go out on patrol by himself. His offal had been superlative, another thing Hannibal missed about Italy.

It took quite a while to carve off slices for all the carnivores but Hannibal didn't mind. Standing up, he could see everyone's faces better, watch them relishing what he provided.

When everyone had been served, he sat down and offered a double portion to the two mates at his side. He couldn't think of a time when he had ever been happier.

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As much as she loved Hannibal, Alana was going to kill him. Who thought it was a good idea to put thirteen cubs under five around a big table together and make them sit through a twelve-course meal with their parents just at the next table but they weren't allowed to get up and disturb them? And how had she gotten roped into supervising the carnage again?

Margot looked like an angel in the candlelight though. She'd whelped a little Alpha cub she was calling Morgan only a few days before but she already looked radiant again. She was sitting just on the other side of Camille so they could talk over her head whenever Alana could think of something to say.

Not that Camille was going to put up with that. She didn't really understand the concept of courses and wanted more of everything. Margot kept explaining to her that there were more amazing treats to come but it was a continual struggle to keep the tantrums to a low simmer. Meanwhile, Alana was also trying to engage Reba's oldest two cubs who were sitting together at the corner on the other side of her looking uncomfortable and suspicious of the whole proceeding.

Hannibal kissed the back of her neck when he came over to deliver the slices of steak and told her how beautiful she looked tonight but mostly she found herself hoping that Margot hadn't seen or heard. Dolores kept trying to capture her attention as well and fortunately the omega was chatting with her at that moment.

Alana had promised Hannibal exclusivity, or at least to talk to him again if she wanted to do anything else. Their arrangement was more pragmatic than the formal bond he had with Abigail. They enjoyed each others' company and both wanted cubs but she didn't have the same deep, all-consuming romantic feelings for him that the others obviously did.

What was the right time to talk to him about Margot? Was there even anything to talk to him about? She'd delivered the cub (and blushed at the awkward memory) but other than that they'd never even touched each other since that first handshake. And they'd only had half a dozen conversations in their life. But still, Alana couldn't help feeling that she was the one. And even though there was never anything overt, she couldn't shake the feeling that Margot felt the same.

It was in the way she patiently and attentively listened to Camille's nonsense and made sure that Alana's water glass was always full and tilted her head slightly so she could catch anything that Alana might be saying from her side of the table. When they played charades to keep the cubs occupied in between courses, Margot mimed being a doctor.

Or maybe she was just fantasizing the whole thing. Why did she have to overthink everything?

So it went through the last three courses of cauliflower cheese bites and spiced apple cider and then a big apple tart that they split between all of them. There was a hazelnut hidden in one slice and whoever got it had to distribute the presents later. Margot held it up triumphantly like she'd won a major award and all the cubs cheered and clapped for her. And that was definitely a flirty smile and wink as she bit into the nut looking directly at Alana.

When the last dishes had finally been cleared they moved their show back into the sitting room where Hannibal lit a fire and laid out what could only be described as a gingerbread palace compound complete with swirling minarets and sleighs draw by liquorice horses.

He put on some Saint-Saëns and they all settled in to open up their presents from the wider pack. They were opening up presents from the immediate family tomorrow morning after "Santa" delivered them.

Alana pulled Will down to snuggle next to her on the couch. The poor omegas looked exhausted from the stress of putting all the dishes together and not dropping anything and being on their best behaviour all night.

"You pups did so well," she told him mussing up his hair a little while he grumbled but let her.

Speaking of run off their feet, poor Margot was trying to deliver presents to thirty people at once without being completely certain of half of their names. Finally she just read out the tag, the recipient jumped up or raised their hand and if it was soft, she tossed it over to them. Otherwise she got one of the more helpful cubs to run it over for her. Meanwhile little Morgan was snuggled up in Alana's arms puffing out his baby lips at her.

There was a lot of chaos in every direction. Aoide and Isolde weren't sure which of them was supposed to get the stuffed lion from Hannibal so they started pulling it in both directions until Hans came over to show them there was a second one for the other twin. They each gave him a peck on the cheek for his trouble and the embarrassed little boy ran over to hide in Will's armpit until his next present was called.

Alana got a lot of yarn and new fabrics for her quilting. She'd been making a sweater for Julian but by the time she finished it, it would probably fit Morgan better. That was one advantage of having so many little ones running around.

Will was getting a lot of things to kit out the nursery for his cub. Every time she looked over, he looked half buried by another stuffie. Jonah came over to show Will the painting supplies Hannibal got him. The poor kid looked half-shellshocked – like he hadn't expected he'd get anything from anyone except his brother and sister. Camille raced over to show Alana the new kaleidoscope Margot got her. When she spun it around, it had little colourful snowflake patterns.

And now it was her turn. Margot got up to deliver this one personally, something book-sized from Bedelia in mistletoe wrapping paper. The omega half tripped trying to avoid Tom and

Jake who were tearing around with gingerbread masonry clutched in their paws. She caught her balance on the sofa cushion behind Alana and, as she was coming back up, gave her a very faint but unmistakable kiss on the corner of her jaw.

Alana felt like she was turning beet red and the entire group was staring at her but when she looked around they were all occupied talking with each other or opening their own presents. Margot gave her another little wink as she flopped down at the base of the tree and squinted theatrically at the label on the next present.

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Will could barely keep his eyes open through Hannibal reading “Twas the Night Before Christmas” and was worried he was at risk of being put to bed with all the cubs immediately afterwards. Alana was stroking his hair which wasn’t making it any easier to stay awake. He was exhausted, but it was the good kind of exhausted and he didn’t really want it to end so soon.

When the rest of the adults got back from putting the cubs to bed though and started drinking in earnest and dancing in the dining room and entrance hall, Will decided he just needed the slightest little lie down before he was ready to join them. Hannibal couldn’t object. He was always telling Will to pace himself these days.

He went into the study where he knew it would be dark and quiet but not comfortable enough for him to fall asleep completely. He flopped down on the chaise lounge and closed his eyes enjoying the blissful silence and darkness.

There was a little breeze though, too crisp to have originated in the house itself. Cracking one eye open, Will could see that one of the windows was open a bit. Hannibal would never have left a window ajar like that in a room he wasn’t using – certainly not in the middle of winter.

Will climbed off the lounge and slunk towards the window. It was just starting to snow outside, the lightest frosty blanket covered everything. The blue Christmas lights on the tree meant he could just see the outlines of little wet footprints trailing from the window into the study.

Will pushed the window shut and latched it as quietly as he could and then picked up a snow globe from the window sill – the closest thing he could find to a weapon. Kicking his shoes off to make less noise, he closed his eyes.

I creep through the dusting of snow, avoiding the windows spilling light into the garden. My fingers are numb but I’ll be inside soon. Once everyone goes to bed, I just need to be patient and stay in my hiding place until it’s time to strike. This is my design.

He was standing next to Hannibal’s desk now, the cold water on the floor soaking into the bottoms of his socks. Reaching over, Will pulled the chain on the light and then raised the snow globe up in surprise when he saw six of the cubs packed under the well of the desk.

They gave a little shriek and Catherine tried to bolt, but Will grabbed her sleeve and pulled her back stepping away and crooking his finger to show the other cubs they should come out.

He was surprised to see Hans and Robbie. Less surprised to see Reba's two oldest cubs and Franklyn's twins.

"What are all you cubs doing out of bed?" Will demanded trying to sound more like a grown up than he felt.

"We're waiting for Santa," one of the twins told him while the others hissed at her for spilling the beans.

"We just want to talk to him," Hans tried to add but he was too ashamed to make eye contact.

"What's this for then?" Will asked holding up the ropes Robbie was carrying into the light.

"Talking." Catherine told him, looking him straight in the eye and daring him to contradict her.

Robbie broke first followed quickly by Hans both of them begging Will not to tell their Papa.

"OK, OK," Will said. It probably wasn't the most responsible answer but all their panic was giving him a headache. "If you can be back in bed by the time I count to ten, I won't tell your parents and we'll forget this every happened."

He spent about a minute getting to five and in the meantime, Hans and Robbie bolted out the study and back upstairs and the Budge twins and Dolarhyde cubs tumbled back out the window as soon as Will reopened it for them and sprinted back across the garden.

Peace and quiet at last. He went back to the desk to clean up the ropes but then there was Hannibal standing at the door of the study looking amused.

"I thought I saw someone running out of here," he said coming in a little further.

"It must just be your imagination," Will told him. "You've had a very busy day."

"What are you planning to use those for?" Hannibal asked, crowding the omega against the desk a little and indicating the ropes in his hands.

"Talking?" Will tried but the Alpha wasn't buying it.

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Abigail didn't think she'd ever get her cubs down to bed after the excitement of Christmas Day. They'd woken her up at the crackiest crack of dawn by jumping up and down on her bed and demanding to see what Santa bought. She may have had the tiniest speck of a hangover after dancing with Zeller and Price half the night but the cubs' genuine excitement was infectious. She decided to encourage them to go infect their Papa while she brushed her teeth and got dressed.

They didn't have much more luck with Hannibal, who insisted that they eat some actual breakfast first. He made it up to them though by adding hot chocolate, macaron and orange slices dipped in chocolate on the side of their scrambled eggs.

Fortunately she'd pumped some milk for Danny before her big night, so all she had to do was warm up the bottle and carry him downstairs. Hannibal wasn't a big fan of them all wandering around downstairs in their pyjamas but this was the one day of the year where he made an exception and she basked in her loose fitting scrubby sweatpanted glory.

They all curled up in the sitting room to open their family presents. Robbie and Jake looked like they were going to work themselves into an aneurysm in their excitement over Santa actually showing up. Marty was just a little too small to understand what the hell was going on so she gathered him up on her other knee to avoid him being trampled by his brothers and spun a little shiny bauble around for him to admire and try to grab.

Will and Abigail gave each other almost the same fishing gear but laughed off the coincidence. It was Jack's fault really. He should have noticed that they had the same things on the lists they'd given him for scavenging trips. She couldn't be that angry though when she approved of the reason he was so distracted.

And she was hooked on those crab cakes things Hannibal had done last night. She didn't think she would ever give up hunting completely, but she had to concede that calorie for calorie fishing was a lot easier and safer. Now that they had the boat docked nearby and Hannibal was hooked on fresh seafood again, they'd have an excuse to make more regular trips.

The moccasins she'd made for each of her boys were a big hit. She'd decided to make them every year and keep the old ones to help remember how little they'd been. It already felt like it was going by so fast. Robbie would be five in just a few months. The oldest two were frighteningly sharp and already reading.

Hannibal gave her a big stuffed rabbit and she rolled her eyes while he smirked at her. She handed the littlest cubs off to Will and Alana and crossed over to sit in his lap to give him a thank you kiss.

"Do you like it, Maža lėlė? Your old one was looking a little worn out."

"I love it Daddy," she whispered in his ear so the cubs couldn't hear. "Whose chimney is Santa going to visit tonight?"

"Yours if you can behave yourself," he told her shifting her off his lap with a smile and a little pat to the rear so he could stand up and carry on distributing presents. Will got some aftershave and they all laughed at how put out he looked, insisting he didn't even need to shave. Randall looks pleased with more woodworking clamps and Alana immediately put on her new jazz records. Obviously Hannibal had been in a mood while he was making up his list.

Once all the wrapping paper had been demolished, they threw on overcoats, heavy socks and shoes, mittens and hats and went out to play in the snow. Hannibal pulled a sled with the littler ones in an endless circle around the fountain while the older kids stagged a snowball fight and then plotted an ambush on the cubs over at Bedelia's and Jack's.

Hannibal nipped out of sled duty by roping Randall into it and then went inside to cook another absurdly massive and elaborate roast goose for lunch with vegetarian lasagne for Alana and cranberry cocktails on the side. They broke out the long-awaited fruitcake, which was lightyears away from the bricks her mother used to lob back and forth at the other ladies in her church group.

The cubs crashed after lunch but then arose around two to spend the afternoon playing with all their new toys and picking at what was left of the gingerbread palace.

Poor Hannibal was bushed, crashing on the sofa in the sitting room for most of the afternoon. He didn't even wake up when the cubs were running toy trains over his back but Abigail chased them off just in case.

He'd worked so hard to make everything magical and amazing for all of them, Abigail wanted to give him something in return.

She tucked her cubs in, turning off everything but their night lights, and then crept back into her own bedroom, afraid that the slightest sound would wake them up again and spoil the surprise she had planned. Fortunately, her room was soundproofed.

Daddy didn't visit every single night but she had a feeling he would tonight. She changed into a slip she knew made him crazy and shivered a little at the lace tickling the back of her thighs. She was just climbing into bed clutching her new bunny when she saw his frame in the door. He was down to just his vest, no tie, shirt loose at the collar and his sleeves rolled up.

"Hi Daddy," she squealed staying on her knees on the bed instead of lying down. She clutched her bunny tighter.

"Hello Lele," he told her, crossing over to stand next to the bed and moving a strand of hair out of her face. "What are you doing up so late?"

"Can't sleep," she said toying with the lower buttons on his vest and biting her lower lip. "Can you help me?"

"You know you only have to ask," he told her, climbed onto the bed facing her still fully dressed.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"You broke my bunny."

"Now Abigail," he said pulling down the spaghetti straps until the top folded down just under her breasts. "You know it isn't nice to tell fibs. You have to take responsibility for your actions too. When you play too roughly sometimes toys break."

He moved from little brushing kisses just over her nipples to a strong suck on one of them and then the other. She'd just finished feeding Danny though so all he got was a dribble from each. It felt amazing though and she arched into it, already halfway gone just feeling his

stubble brushing across the tender skin at the tips of her breasts and smelling his hair and his strong fingers pressing into the curve of her back in all the right places.

“Does my new bunny tickle too?”

“He does,” Hannibal showed her how to reach into the flap along the stuffie’s back and pull out the vibrator.

She smiled and spread her legs a little wider while he lubed it up and then reached down to massage her firmly with his free hand.

She gasped a little from the cold as he teased down her bloomers and started circling her button with the tip of the toy and then pressing it in to loosen her up but then he was kissing her to distract her. She stroked the sheer fabric on the back of his vest and then grabbed the loop there as he flicked the toy on and its little ears started buzzing into her.

He was back suckling again and she played with the soft hair at the back of his neck until the clenches in her tummy started coming more rhythmically. Then she lay back, shimmied out of what was left of her nightie and opened up for him.

“Did Santa bring you everything you wanted this year?” he asked turning off the bunny and setting it on the nightstand. He was on his hands and knees over her, still fully dressed, and reached up with one hand to caress under her cheekbone.

“Almost, Daddy,” she told him looking up at him from under her eyelashes and reaching for one of his thumbs to suck. He tasted a little lemony and sweet.

“What did you want that you didn’t get, Lele?” he asked with a very faint grin because he obviously already knew the answer.

“Another dolly.”

“Are you sure?” he teased, lifting his cock out and stroking it with the thumb she’d wet for him. “That’s a lot of responsibility for a little girl.”

“Yes, please Daddy! You know I’ll take good care of it.”

“I know you will. You always do,” he gave her a long kiss and then reached under one of her thighs to pull her up a little and over onto her side. Then he lay down behind her, spooning her and pressing his long, thick cock up into her. She clutched around her soft bunny as the waves in her tummy grew stronger but was careful not to pull on his ears this time.

Daddy was pumping so slowly in and out of her, kneading her breasts until they were weeping for him, carding through her hair before gathering it up into a bun so it was out of his face and then kissing the backs of her shoulders.

Her pulse was fluttering right down at the root of him and she lay the latex bunny’s ears flat against both of them and turned them on to tickle again giving a little laugh when he started behind her.

He started going faster now and she was clamping so hard around him she couldn't help moaning and wailing a little but he wrapped an arm around her tummy to reassure her. He was rolling them a little with the strength of his driving and she found herself more on her belly. She turned the bunny off and put it away to better enjoy the sloppy, squishy noises he was making in her.

"Oh Daddy, it's too big!" she wailed when she felt the edge of his knot pressing into her lips. Sometimes when he was really excited Daddy got carried away and forgot she was too little to take all of him.

"Sorry, Maža lėlė," he said at once, pulling back and little and wrapping a hand around his knot to keep it out. "Is that better?"

"Mmm," she hummed nodding and slinking back against him. They were both close now and she gave him an encouraging squeeze. Now when he thrust in the top of his fist followed knocking into her button and before she knew it the friction was buzzing through her whole body at once. She gave a little cry, everything tightening and bursting at the same time. A few seconds later she could feel him flooding into her as well, gripping around her chest and giving a satisfied grunt.

They rolled over on their sides and he stayed in her for a little while even though he hadn't knotted, nice and plump and warm, smoothing her hair and telling her what a good girl she was for Daddy.

Her nipples were rock hard and when they brushed against the fur of the bunny she gave a deep shiver. Daddy pulled out, tucked himself away and then draped a heavy comforter over her shoulders. He kissed her forehead as he turned out the lights and said, "Sweet dreams, Lele."

She mumbled something that started out in her head as, "I love you, Daddy" but was just a stream of sounds by the time it made it to her lips.

She fought to keep her eyes open for one last glance of him, silhouetted against the door frame, but then she was drifting off feeling safe and secure, his love warm and deep inside her.

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